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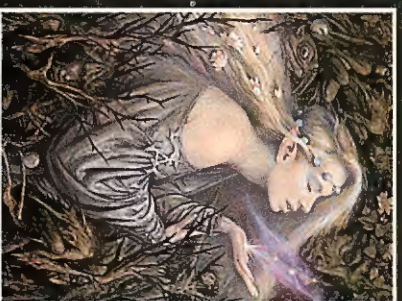
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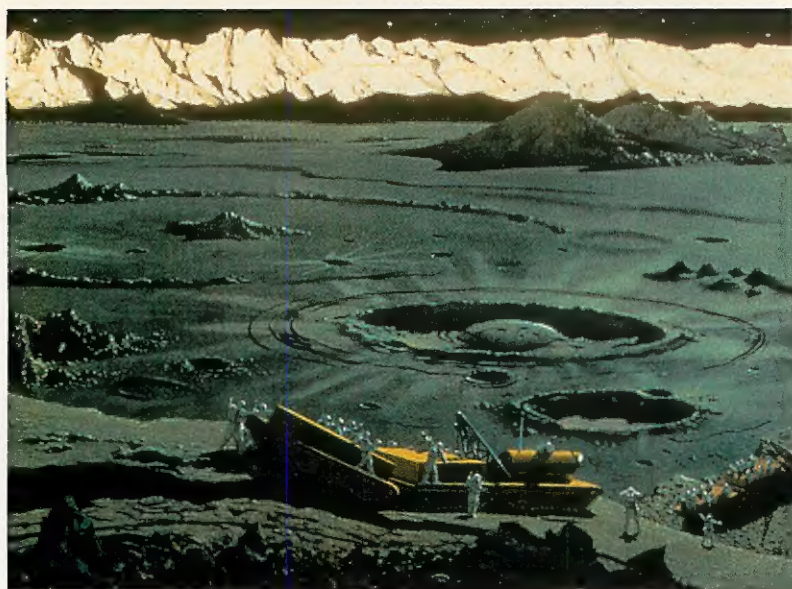
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COVER: Artist Bob Eggleton calls this his "Baroque" spaceship. ABOVE: Our Gallery (page 86) features the art of Chesley Bonestell. This painting is entitled Exploring the Plains of Sinus Roris.

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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Dear Mr. Edelman:

There's a lot to enjoy about the September issue, but it's the editorial that prompted me to write. I'm young enough to have missed the experience of bomb drills in school—my Cold War bogeymen were Brezhnev and the Shah, not Khrushchev and Castro—but my earliest vivid memories are of fallout shelter shopping with my father, the mildewy dampness of the air inside the cold concrete shells, the hollow sounds of boots and my own brown Keds echoing in quarters I couldn't imagine living in, and of course, the taste, smell, and feel of freeze-dried ice cream.

Dad ended up building his own shelter from the plans in one of those nuclear war survival skills books that everybody used to have. He converted it from a large septic tank, nailed a couple of military style bunk beds to the sides, and filled one half with big metal canisters with purple labels reading: "Dehydrated hamburger, 50 pounds" and "Dehydrated carrots and peas, 75 pounds." The shelter remained unused behind our barn, with the exception of two or three nights in the first year when Dad made everybody sleep there and for thorough "emergency drills" to make sure we'd be prepared when the inevitable happened. Last time I checked it was still there, sealed off with concrete, presumably because the family who bought our house didn't want their small children falling in by accident.

I have small children of my own these days—three by last count—and from time to time I wonder how their growing-up experiences will differ from mine, deprived as they are of fallout shelters, chalk drawings of mushroom clouds on grade-school blackboards, and *Red Dawn*. Of course, they'll have the specter of AIDS to worry about (unless something startling happens in the world of medicine in the next decade). AIDS is an abstract fear anyway—even the sexually promiscuous often don't take it seriously. Nothing to compare with the numbing, just around the corner dread of nuclear holocaust.

I guess most people's ending thoughts on this subject would be something sentimental along the lines of "maybe someday children will grow up without fear." Not me, though...

The writer in me just wants to speculate on how my kids, and the society they build, will be different, so far removed from the threat of extinction that's driven our country for these fifty years. Will they be cocky and arrogant, transforming the United States into a brash teenager among nations (perhaps simply maintaining the status quo)? Or just naive? I don't know, but I'm willing to bet the answer will make a hell of a story.

Bill Kte'pi

Dear Editor:

I read with interest John Brunner's Essay on pharmaceutical effects. I, too, have reached the conclusion that most drugs cause as many symptoms as they treat.

Right now, the FDA, the AMA and the pharmaceutical companies are trying to take away your right to choose alternatives to drugs and surgery. (By the time you read this it may already be too late to stop them from winning in the House of Representatives.) They've tried to do this several times in the past, but public outcry has prevented it. This time they're using smear tactics and a disinformation campaign to discredit such things as herbs, vitamins and amino acids.

Sure, there are times when a drug's benefits outweigh the side effects. But not very often.

So pay attention to what the FDA is doing, now and in the future. Don't assume they have your best interest as their first priority.

Sincerely,
Karen Stauffer

Dear Mr. Edelman:

In your November 1994 editorial you stated "Science Fiction fans are made, not born." But no one taught me about speculative fiction. It is an instinct for me, like breathing, thirst and sleep. It is part of who I am, and it is the best part of me. I only feel sorry for modern kids who seem to think that sewer slime like *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* is so great. They are learning the wrong thing, namely that flash and glitter are more important than story content.

Science Fiction and Fantasy should explore the diverse realms of "what if" and not provide 30 or 60 minutes of inane situations under a fancy label or yet another variation on a novel by Ray Bradbury to make a novella by whomever. We all deserve better, because we care about the road on which we tread.

Sincerely
Gary Morgan

Dear Editor:

In your November 1994 letter column, Mr. Mortillaro laments over his apparent inability to visit space in his lifetime. I propose that he might himself walk on the moon if he dares stretch his dream a bit farther to consider the cryonics option. With six major cryonics companies in the U.S., he could well become part of a boundless future if nanotech revival is indeed perfected.

Shane Allen Mohler

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872.

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

VOLUME 3

NUMBER 3

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PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

Picture Credits: Bantam Books: 10; Dark Horse Comics: 18; Frederick C. Durant III: 4, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91; Bob Eggleton: Cover; Mark Maxwell: 24; Metro Goldwyn Mayer: 20, 22, 92; Wizards of the Coast: 98

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EDITORIAL

By Scott Edelman

Without SF short stories, there'd be no science fiction.



It was in the early pulp magazines that the heart and soul of science fiction was born.

THE HEART AND SOUL OF SCIENCE FICTION HAS always been the SF short story. Though SF movies may generate the flash and cash, ideas are born on the printed page, as they have been in SF magazines for the past sixty-five years. Print writers are the ones who generate the sense of wonder and constantly push the envelope of SF with new ideas and creations, only to see films, for the most part, do little more than strip mine the ore they have created. Science fiction cinema is still struggling to advance, but intellectually it has not yet progressed past the SF pulps of the '40s. The magazines are where SF survives in its purest form.

That is as it should be. Call me biased, but I grew up on the science fiction short story, and my memories of the characters and stories that touched me are predominantly from short stories, not novels. Robert Heinlein's "All You Zombies," Tom Disch's "The Squirrel Cage," "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes, "Repent Harlequin," said the Ticktockman" by Harlan Ellison. Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron." I could go on, but I'd prefer to let your thoughts wander to your own favorites. (I'd also like to think that someday a story or two you first read in the pages of *Science Fiction Age* might be on such a list.)

Short stories seem to be able to attain a level of perfection rarely approached by the novel form. The burst of energy contained in a short story is difficult to sustain when running the marathon of a novel.

An important fact to remember is that though a novel is always a novel, short stories come in a variety of sizes. The distinctions developed by the administrators of the Hugo and Nebula awards define three different short forms of SF, as follows:

A short story is any work of fiction composed of less than 7,500 words.

Fiction 7,500 words and more in length but less than 17,500 words is called a novelette. Fiction 17,500 words and up but less than 40,000 words is classified a novella. Anything greater than 40,000 words is a novel.

The novella is a tricky and revered form in SF, too long to be fully a short story, yet too short to really be a novel. Those of us who love short fiction often had that love engendered after reading many novels which didn't seem to have earned the number of pages on which they were printed. Many over-inflated novels would have made near-perfect novellas, had the author resisted the urge and the market influences to turn in a novel. On the other hand, many readers who dislike the shorter forms find that their aversion has to do with begrudging the effort of bringing the world to life in their minds, only to be forced to leave it as soon as it's begun. In a novella, the writer has more space for world-building and character development and is allowed to flesh out without being forced to pad. Each story should find its own perfect length, and the novella allows for that.

Here in the pages of *Science Fiction Age* we have spent our first few years delivering the best short stories and novelettes we could find. Up until now, however, we have been unable to bring you novellas, because each issue has been so stuffed with the finest of fiction and nonfiction that the size of the magazine has prevented us from doing that without limiting the number and variety of SF selections we want to bring you. With this issue, that has changed. As you hold the magazine in your hands, feeling its weight, perhaps you have already realized that something is different. For starting with this issue, in our continuing efforts to improve *Science Fiction Age*, we have added an extra sixteen pages devoted solely to fiction, which will allow us to bring you the more intricate stories which the novella form allows.

At the same time, in order to help bring you this new and improved *Science Fiction Age*, we must also announce that as of this issue, our cover price will go up to \$3.95, an increase of \$.50 per issue. Paper costs are skyrocketing, and the nightly news is filled with reports of a rise in postal rates. No magazine can absorb this burden without passing some of that on to you, the consumer. A rise in price was inevitable. But we believe that the additional pages of fiction are well worth the additional cost, and will continue to make us the best value for your magazine dollar.

Our first such presentation in the new, improved and expanded *Science Fiction Age* is Ray Aldridge's "Stolen Faces, Stolen Names," another adventure set in his fascinating Dilvermoon universe. In future issues we will continue to round up the finest fiction at all lengths, providing you with the heart and soul of SF. Thanks for continuing your journey with us through this science fiction age. □



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By Martha Soukup, Paul Di Filippo and Eric Baker

Connie Willis visits future Hollywood for a thought-provoking *Remake*.



In the future, actors will be obsolete. *Remake's* cover art is by Gary Ruddell.

CONNIE WILLIS HAS ALWAYS ACKNOWLEDGED A debt to Hollywood in her intricately plotted stories, especially her clever and popular screwball comedies. She calls it "comedy" instead of "humor," another clue for anyone who hasn't heard her discussing the great early practitioners of the screenplay, especially her hero Preston Sturges, creator of *Miracle at Morgan's Creek*. Her homage to bygone days of film, when satires could be romantic and words were often still king, was made explicit in a recent screwball Christmas romance partaking of *Miracle on 34th Street* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, and is now made even more explicit in her science fiction novella *Remake* (Bantam, 175 pp., trade paperback, \$11.95), a book that suggests that Willis, at least, doesn't expect to see such days back soon in Hollywood.

Willis sets her tale in a near-future Hollywood where computer-graphics technology has made live-action filming obsolete. The occasional new actor is only a face, posing for a computer model that can be put through the script's paces side by side with long-dead actors (the ones not tied up in copyright disputes). The scripts are retreads too, an endless series of old movies with different actors plugged into the leads. There's hardly a trace of actual creativity to be found. Studio execs troll film-student parties looking for would-be talent (all quite drug-addled and dressed as Marilyn Monroe) to bed. It's a decadent scene, yet not, as Willis emphasizes with movie clichés and dialogues at the beginning of each chapter, unrecognizable from the debauched myth Hollywood has made of itself.

Our hero, a young film student and film-hacking tech

named Tom, is straight from a Hollywood mold himself. He's cynical, flip, hard-drinking, and desperately romantic underneath it all, with an encyclopedic knowledge of the films he constantly quotes and is being paid to undermine. In a play on another long-time Willis theme, his new gig is to remove all visual and auditory references to drugs and alcohol.

Tom and a very bright Marilyn Monroe clone take the wrong drug during one party and find themselves fixated on another young woman, Alis, a would-be dancer decades too late for Fred Astaire. Tom, putting his move on her, tries to tag her as a Ruby Keeler. (It's a cute bit that Tom labels everyone in his life as an old-time movie star: it helps him keep his flip distance while making some sort of sense of the chaos and helping him feel superior. His Monroe friend he calls Hedda Hopper because she's always on top of the gossip—but only the modern gossip. Ignorant of Hollywood history, "Heada" misspells Tom's nickname for her.) Between the wrong addictive substances at the right time and her own stubborn individuality, though, Alis is Alis, not a Marilyn or Ruby, which is what strikes Tom (romantically) and Heada (non-). She doesn't want to be a face. Alis wants to dance in musicals, a movie genre not even being done in computerized remakes. We can tell Tom is nuts about her because when he looks at her, her hair always seems to be backlit.

This is enough to get us whirling headlong into the plot: Alis unable to get what she wants, Tom doing what he doesn't want, Heada pluckily going unnoticed by the usual thick-headed romantic lead, and everything against a high-tech background that has the same hackers who make Hollywood run develop "skids" (instantaneous transportation lines) and possibly time travel. The maguffin is the mystery of how Alis has started to turn up in dancing roles in films made before she was born.

Willis in this mode is all tricky plot, social satire, and snappy, appealing dialogue at a hundred miles an hour. She's hot on the heels of Sturges. She wants to be: she wants to remind you of good old stuff and make you curl your lip at bad retreads with pat endings. She succeeds in that.

In the best Hollywood tradition, Willis tapdances over a number of improbabilities, both in the science-fictional bits and in the characters' actions (if she was just rehearsing then why would Alis go to all the trouble of—but never mind). But everyone's talking too fast and furiously for it to be a bother. And it's a grand Hard SF tradition too, seeing how hard you can bend the elements to do what you want to do. Mostly she pulls it off.

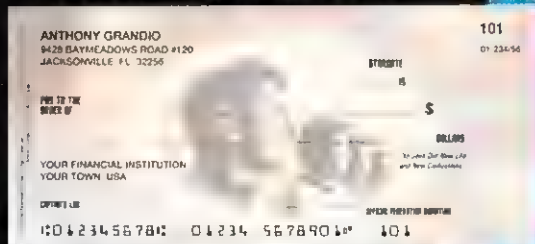
I like a book that leaves the reader niggling at ethical problems when it's over, though there's one question left from this book that Willis never actually raises or treats in the text. Where today the original black and white Astaire movie can be found in large video stores along with the colorized, and a dig through a used-book shop might turn up a novel in its old unbowlrized form, Willis' Hollywood not only tampers with old movies, but

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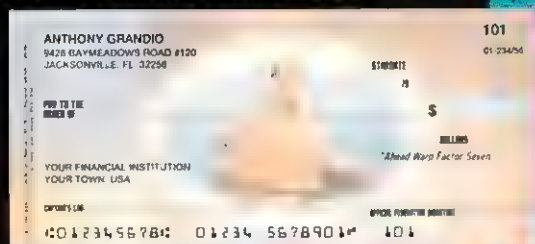
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Obviously a bad thing. We don't like it, and we don't like the petty motives of the people making it happen: the big execs with their girlfriends, the smaller execs trying to hang onto their jobs. What we might wonder about is whether it's less a bad thing when Alis' performance erases even some anonymous chorine's performance in an Indiana Jones movie—just because Alis really loves to dance and Tom really loves the movies and Alis. It makes for a good argument, if you're looking for a good argument to have with a loved one.

Remake is, above all, a fine and charming read, well paced and backlit at all the right moments. And it is a fine thing to read a story that hasn't been padded out to twice its natural length, though it easily could have been: may Willis keep writing novellas, uncommercial as they may be.

Martha Soukup

Superheroes, edited by John Varley and Ricia Mainhardt, Ace Books, 372 pp., trade paperback, \$12.00.

The superhero as we currently know him—or her, or it—has distant roots in the science fiction field. Novels and stories about more-than-human characters long predate the appearance of Superman himself in the June 1938 issue of *Action Comics* (a character dreamed up, by the way, in the heads of two SF fans). Superman's advent signalled the branching of the superhero tale into a kind of para-science fiction, which would henceforth be found only in the medium of comics. Soon, the superhero sub-genre had developed an amazing assortment of story-telling conventions and fetishes, tags and tics by which the true superhero could be distinguished from any possible counterparts in the SF literature per se. Costumes and secret identities, malevolent villains and alternate dimensions formed a firewall between comics and science fiction.

For decades, one truth reigned: at their most science fictional, comics were never true SF; and at their most comicslike, SF was never really superheroic.

Then, like most verities, this one was subtly undermined and eventually overturned.

Perhaps the transformation began in 1975, with the series engineered by Byron Preiss known as *Weird Heroes* (although much of the flavor of this series was that of pulp-magazine heroes such as Doc Savage, a whole 'nother set of overstuffed tights). Tom De Haven's *Freaks' Amour* (1979), with its atom-spawned mutants, played a part too, as did the growing maturation of "graphic novels" (in terms of both audience and publishers). But what is certain is that 1986-87 was when

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the firewall was finally breached from both sides. From the comics side, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* succeeded as real SF; from the SF side, the *Wild Cards* anthology edited by George Martin fused the superhero with traditional SF storytelling. By 1992, a superhero novel such as Michael Bishop's *Count Geiger's Blues* could be seen as a mature mutant.

Now, the latest such fusion or crossover vehicle arrives: *Superheroes*, an original anthology edited by John Varley and Ricia Mainhardt. *Superheroes* consists of three types of stories. The first form perhaps half of the volume, and represent the deepest fusion of comics and SF. In essence, they could easily be imagined as scripts for undrawn comics. The second type are a kind of meta-superhero tale, commenting on the genre more than exemplifying it. And the third type, thankfully only a handful, are simply fish out of water: traditional SF or fantasy tales, perhaps well-told, but not truly germane.

Let's dispose of this third type first. In "She Who Might Be Obeyed," by Roland Green and Frieda A. Murray, a woman who finds out she

can more or less compel people to follow her subtle vocal suggestions tries to employ her talents. Joseph Sherman's "The Defender of Central Park" is a wan urban-troll story. Gerald Hausman and Roger Zelazny, who recently collaborated on the outstanding novel *Wilderness*, separately and respectively contribute "Four Tales of Many Names" and "The Long Crawl of Hugh Glass" (an excerpt from their novel). These stories attempt, however subtly, to dragoon frontiersmen and Native Americans into the superhero canon, a dubious hijacking rather like SF itself claiming Plato as an ancestor. "Basic Training," by Jerry Bingham, essays a similar shanghaiing. P. J. Beese and Todd Cameron Hamilton delve into the Arthurian mythos with "God Save the King." John DeChancie's "Tu Quoque" is a straight SF tale of aliens-among-us, although it possesses a neat ending twist.

Once we eliminate this minority from consideration, we're left with a variegated lot of stories. All are competent, and a few are outstanding, contributing new insights into both SF and superheroes.

Among those pieces which constitute the meta-commentary, we find Mickey Zucker Reichert's "Shadow Storm," in which the whole concept of superhero emerges as a kind of psychic projection of inner turmoil and outer needs. Dennis O'Neil, a comics legend in his own right, contributes the deeply felt "Bicycle Hero," which shares many of the assumptions and conclusions of the Reichert story. Brian M. Thomsen's "Time For a Hero" examines the cynical and exploitive relationship between society at large and those whom it drafts as potential throwaway heroes. Certainly the most gleefully whacked of these "fringe" stories is Steve Antczak's "Captain Asimov," in which a standard Asimovian robot of the next century undergoes damage to its electronic brain and becomes convinced that it is a superhero.

Finally, we reach the core of the book: superhero adventures—recognizable and undeniable—recounted with the tricks, verve, and intelligence of SF.

Many of the stories, while entertaining, remain slight. Pieces such as "A Clean Sweep," by Laurel K. Hamilton; "Empowered," by Alan Dean Foster; "Handing on the Goggles," by B. W. Clough; "Super Acorns," by Mike Resnick and Lawrence Schimel; and "Theme Music Man," by Jody Lynn Nye, are all one-note japes, making fun of the more absurd aspects of the whole superhero mystique. Silly costumes, silly powers, and silly names, along with logical inconsistencies and the intersection of mundane necessities with supertalents, provide the fodder for many jokes.

One step, albeit a large one, up from these entries is John Varley's own contribution (not discounting his charming autobiographical introduction): "Truth, Justice and the Politically Correct Socialist Path." This is the alternate-world story of Superman's landing, upbringing, and career in the old USSR. Shackled—both figuratively and at times literally—by Communist ideology, Kyril Kentarovsky, otherwise known as Bolshoiman ("IS IT A MIG-25? IS IT A TUPOLEV-144? NO. IT'S BOLSHOIMAN!"), is a dim-witted boob who undergoes one indignity after another. Funny and well-written, with many clever details, this story could have been much more. As it stands, it's not so much the true and deep story of the Communist Superman, but rather the Communist version of the *Mad* parody "Superduperman."

But the best story in the book, to my mind, is Paul Kupperberg's "Reflected Glory." (Not coincidentally, Kupperberg happens to be a veteran comics writer and editor.) Narrated in the first-person by a kind of Jimmy-Olsen figure gone rotten, this story tells of the exploitation of the world's first and only superhero, an enigma christened Ultima. Not only are Ultima's powers derived in a unique way, they also form the vulnerability that brings him down. Kupperberg is really also the only writer to make explicit the similarity of superheroes and freaks, an issue explored at length in Leslie Feidler's fascinating *Freaks*

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

Age of Innocence: The Romantic Art of Jeffrey Jones, by Jeffrey Jones (Underwood Books). Jones has evolved from his early comic book and SF work to develop a lush style that evokes the Pre-Raphaelites. With his art now available primarily in limited edition prints, pick up this volume that collects his best.

Songs of Earth and Power, by Greg Bear (Tor). An epic fantasy by the winner of both the Hugo and Nebula awards. Originally published as two paperback novels in the mid-'80s (*The Infinity Concerto* and *The Serpent Mage*), Bear has revised his tale for its first hardcover appearance.

Jasmine Nights, by S. P. Somtow (St. Martin's). His series such as the *Chronicles of the High Inquest* and the *Aquilid* have won him many fans, but this winner of the John Campbell Award for Best New SF Writer shows us that growing up in Thailand can be as surreal as any of his fiction.

Bernie Wrightson's Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley and Bernie Wrightson (Charles F. Miller). With Robert DeNiro rampaging across the silver screen, now is the time to rediscover the Frankenstein monster in the words of his creator and the images of one of our greatest horror artists. The creature never looked so good.

The Pop-Up Buck Rogers, by Dick Calkins and Phil Nowlan (Applewood Books). It has been over sixty-five years since this space opera hero was invented, becoming such a symbol of the field that those who don't like SF dismiss it as "that Buck Rogers stuff." Having spawned movies, TV and more, he is back to reach another generation.

Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture, edited by Mary Dery (Duke University Press). Some days it seems as if the Internet has replaced the fanzine, and the new electronic highway has developed an SF culture all its own. Find out the details of this technology that has moved from fiction to reality.

His Share of Glory: The Short Fiction of Cyril M. Kornbluth, by C. M. Kornbluth (NESFA Press). "The Little Black Bag" and "The Marching Morons" are but two of the classic short stories produced by this author, brought back into print as part of NESFA Press' continuing admirable journey of rediscovery.

Sherlock Holmes in Orbit, edited by Mike Resnick and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW). Dame Jean Conan Doyle authorized the publication of this volume containing twenty-six new stories about the world's most famous detective in science-fictional situations, with stories by writers McIntyre, Effinger, Malzberg, Resnick and many others.

A Feast Unknown, by Philip Jose Farmer (Masquerade Books). No writer has ever brought the repressed sexuality of early SF to the forefront as has Farmer, particularly in this satirical novel which turns a jaundiced eye on a thinly veiled Tarzan and Doc Savage, now back in print.

Matter's End, by Gregory Benford (Bantam Spectra). In his three decades as one of the field's premiere award-winning Hard SF authors, Benford has primarily focused on novels. His second short story collection will make you (and magazine editors) wish otherwise.

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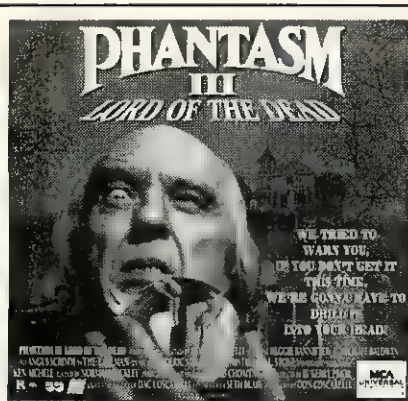
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(1978). Delving deep into the ways in which innocence is corrupted—both by one's self and by the culture at large—this story by itself would justify purchase of *Superheroes*. Up, up and away!

Paul Di Filippo

***The Immortality Option*, by James P. Hogan, Del Rey, 352 pp., hardcover, \$21.00.**

The Immortality Option is the most audacious book I have read this year. In this sequel to his 1983 book, *Code of the Lifemaker*, James P. Hogan takes the reader on a pell-mell romp through the predilections of organic intelligence, machine intelligence, and all the flavors in between. From the long lost past to the unwholesome near-future, Hogan spins a tale which builds to an ending that will leave you laughing and amazed.

James P. Hogan first appeared on the science fiction scene in 1979 with one of those happy accidents in which a great novel gets a great cover and becomes a classic. *Inherit the Stars* leapt off the shelves because Darrell Sweet's cover painting showed two NASA astronauts standing on a moonscape, looking down at a skeleton in a red pressure suit. It was impossible to look at that cover without wanting to know who the skeleton had been and how they had gotten to the moon. Once you opened the cover to find out, you were treated to a wonderful book about scientists plying their trades and remaining loyal to their research, even when it leads them into a completely new view of human evolution.

And then in 1982, with his book *Voyage from Yesteryear*, Hogan set his career down a different path, much as Heinlein had done with *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Where before Hogan had been concerned with science and scientists, he now turned his attention to politics and pop culture. *Voyage from Yesteryear* is a novel about a libertarian utopia where human colonists, shipped to another planet as frozen embryos, are raised by robot teachers to be free of the plagues of greed, superstition, laziness, and irrationality. When a ship from Earth arrives to reassert the home world's dominance, the colonists defeat its crew's schemes with quiet competence.

Hogan's strength remains the portrayal of scientists at work. The necessary drudgery, the bursts of inspiration, the clash of personalities, these are all things that Hogan does well. In contrast, his political and cultural characters seem at best two-dimensional. Worst of all, when writing about the forces that shape the events he is protesting, Hogan appears naive. Take, for instance, the vapidness of today's news media.

In *The Immortality Option*, Hogan includes a scene where the heads of several large corporations get together with the heads of the TV networks to decide what will be the "big" stories of the coming six months. Obviously, boardroom politics can have an effect on what stories are broadcast on the nightly news, but the Chairman of GE doesn't get

together with the Chairman of Capitol Cities and the Taft family to set a national agenda.

Mercifully, scenes like this are rare in the *Immortality Option*. Most of the book is devoted to following a group of scientists as they attempt to solve a grand dilemma. The twist is that they are not human scientists.

As I said in the beginning, *Immortality* is the sequel to *Code of the Lifemaker*. In *Code*, probes sent by Earth discover evidence of some sort of machinery in place on Saturn's moon Titan. An Orion nuclear rocket is sent to investigate, with a multinational crew of soldiers, scientists, and administrators, plus a professional psychic with his entourage and their debunking nemesis. What the humans discover is a world where an automated factory ship whose programming went awry has provided the impetus for a race of intelligent machines, the Taloids.

The Taloids are a nice counterpoint to all the deadly, super-intelligent machines that inhabit science fiction, from Fred Saberhagen's Berserkers to Gregory Benford's galaxy-dominating machines. The Taloids are an evolved intelligence made of machine parts. They have a lesser understanding of the mechanical and electrical processes that animate them than we do the chemical and organic processes that animate us. Thus, while their jungles contain vast factories employing nuclear bulk transmutation and total waste recycling, the Taloids exist at what, on Earth, would be a Middle Ages level of technology, science, and superstition. In fact, the plan by the evil Earth corporations to turn the Taloids into happy industrial slaves is thwarted by the use of more sophisticated human technology to found a new religion among the Taloids.

Immortality has the machines striking back. The book's main character is an alien artificial intelligence called GENIUS (General Intelligence Universal Simulation) 5, who for most of the book is about eight steps ahead of the rest of the characters. GENIUS 5 is quirky though. He was created by the Borjans (the same race which made the factory ship that went awry and created the Taloids), and they are not a nice people.

The Immortality Option has the feel of a Penn and Teller sketch, but it is also a hard SF novel about evolution, intelligence, and first contact. A true sequel, it takes the situation of the first book and builds on it rather than simply rehashing it. Characters grow and change, points political and social are made. And in the end, *The Immortality Option* proves that it is those who think themselves the shrewdest who are the easiest to fool.

Eric Baker

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

■ Timothy Leary hailed Philip K. Dick as "a major twenty-first century writer," while Ursula K. LeGuin called him "our own homegrown Borges." But unfortunately, an *L. A. Weekly* headline makes a more telling judgment on the author of the novel *Do Androids*

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Dream of Electric Sheep? (later made into the movie *Blade Runner*): "The Novelist of the '90s Has Been Dead Eight Years." For Dick didn't live long enough to see the fruits of his life's work.

The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings (Pantheon Books, hardcover 368 pp., \$27.50) edited by Lawrence Sutin, illustrates the dichotomies of Dick's existence perfectly. It is filled with Dick's own words in essays, autobiographical writing, and fragments of previously unpublished novels and proposals. Sutin, who previously wrote *Divine Invasion*, a biography of Philip K. Dick, has made a welcome addition to SF critical literature and Dick scholarship.

■ The related genres of SF, fantasy, and horror have had best-of-the-year collections published for decades, but until now, they have been limited solely to words. With the importance of art to the fields of popular literature, it's a bit of a surprise that such a void has existed for so long. Cathy Burnett and Arnie Fenner have joined together to edit a volume that finally fills that black hole. *Spectrum: The First Annual Collection of the Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art* (Underwood Books, 152 pp., full color, \$18.95 soft cover, \$29.95 hard cover) does just what the title says, gathering together the finest visionary art of the past three years. Judged by a blue ribbon panel consisting of Michael Whelan, Don Ivan Punchatz, Dave Stevens and others,

this large volume brings an SF art museum into your home. Almost 200 works were chosen from the over 500 entries to create a book of chimerical artworks encompassing an inclusive number of genre and media. More than just the usual suspects are included here, and on top of SF bookcovers and magazine art, you will find the work of editorial cartoonists, comic book illustrators, and greeting card designers. In addition to the cream of the crop collection of art, you will also find last year's winners of the Chesley Awards, named after seminal SF artist Chesley Bonestell (see our Gallery on page 86). Artists' addresses have been included, which will aid both art collectors and directors looking for the best in imaginative illustration. □

Harlan Ellison rides a Dark Horse to invade his personal *Dream Corridors*.

YOU KNOW, NOT SO LONG AGO IT WAS genuinely hard to get hold of Harlan Ellison's work. Word would get passed among fans: a dealer had a battered hardback copy of *Deathbird Stories*. You'd haunt obscure used bookstores in the hope that someone's mother had "accidentally" liberated some beloved dog-eared paperbacks. To be an Ellison fan back then was to suffer.

So when a year like 1994 rolls around, when Ellison is appearing regularly as a commentator for *Sci-Fi Buzz* on cable television's Sci-Fi Channel, when "Mefisto in

adaptations of Ellison stories past and present, plus an original prose story each issue by Ellison himself.

This is no vanity project in which Big Name Author has been paid for the use of his name and his prose stories for adaptation. The introductions, in Ellison's unmistakable style, pretty much put to rest any such notion! We follow Ellison inside a vast pyramid, where we're invited to look in the rooms behind the oddly shaped doors—under strict supervision, of course. It seems that a couple of dreams have gone rogue, and it's not a wise

idea to wander too far from the guide....

Ellison has a vast body of work to choose from, and this special shows off to good advantage the range of what can be done in graphic format. Judging from these initial five stories, the promise of future issues is awesome.

One of the stories is "If This Be Utopia," adapted and penciled by Phil Foglio and inked by Matt Howarth, two artists well known to those who follow comic comics. This is a shaggy, um, *thing* story, as light and humorous as all the preceding have not been, and a good reminder of Ellison's range. A future yuppie couple buy a 'rareie'—a top of the line artificial life form pet and status symbol—in an attempt to keep up with the Joneses, only to find there is a downside to cutting edge biotechnology. You might say it blows up in their faces.... The art is very busy, appropriately dialogue-heavy, and, interestingly, without a caption to be found. The last story is "On the Slab," a Lovecraft homage adapted by the ubiquitous (and talented) Perozich, with art by Gary Gianni, who lends great feeling



Stephen Hickman's cover.

and exquisite rendering to a meditation on the legend of Prometheus: a dead giant is found entombed in the ground in Rhode Island (where else but in Lovecraft's home state?), and a business man who buys the rights to exhibit him finds himself strangely empathizing with his purchase.

Big Name Authors often have a reputation for coasting on their successes, and indeed there are a number of offenders taking up space on the shelves these days. It must be difficult, when you have publishers eager to buy your grocery lists, to resist and insist on a

high standard for your work, as high a standard as got you to your Big Name status. Ellison's perfectionism is well-known, and most certainly he did not compromise on his standards in putting together this book. In fact the feeling that distinguishes it is not the harsh and often violent physical or emotional tone of the stories, but the delight that Ellison takes in delivering unto the reader something that is really neat and fun.

There is original artwork for both covers, front by Stephen Hickman, back by Overton Lloyd. The *Special* also has a special bonus, a double-painting foldout centerfold by Jill Bauman. Dark Horse Comics knows how to create good anthology series—before they even announced the book, they amassed 140 pages of artwork, to ensure that in this era of deadlines whizzing past distributors' heads, they'll have the book out on time—and this can only be applauded. Ellison fans and comics fans—not mutually exclusive sets—have much to look forward to in *Harlan Ellison's Dream Corridor*.

Connie Hirsch

COMICS

Onyx" wins a Bram Stoker award, when his collaboration with artist Jacek Yerka, *Mind Fields*, sells over 100,000 copies, when new Ellison stories pop up all over the place from *Omni* to *Science Fiction Age*, the jaded consumer might begin to wonder if this accessibility is for the best, if the product isn't getting devalued, if because you can get your hands on the stuff, it is somehow less worthy *merely for the fact that you can get it*.

Pish-tosh. Quality doesn't necessarily link up with quantity for good or bad, and sometimes Big Name Author got Big as much by a drive for perfection as a willingness to work like a horse. Any career that has produced over 2,000 short stories, essays, non-fiction articles, columns, and scripts may have some dogs along the way, but it would be amazing if the old dog didn't have a few tricks left—in fact, quite a few tricks.

The '90s may be the decade of the Harlan Renaissance. This year, Ellison's script of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* will be published as *The Illustrated I, Robot* from Warner Aspect. *Harlan Ellison's Dream Corridor Special* is the preview issue of a regular anthology series set to debut in April 1995 from Dark Horse Comics. Co-edited by Ellison and Bob Schreck, this book will feature

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MOVIES

by Lisa Maccarillo

Cyberpunk heroine *Tank Girl* plays tour guide to a gritty tomorrow.



Tank Girl's world is that of 2033, where water is as valuable as gold. Malcolm McDowell plays Kesslee and Lori Petty is the tough-yet-vulnerable Tank Girl.

FOR THOSE LUCKY ENOUGH TO LIVE ON THE CORRECT geographical longitude, or hip enough to seek her out, Tank Girl—a scruffy-headed, kangaroo loving, super-tank driving, Department of Water hating, machine-gun loving iconoclast—is a hero. But, to this date, only a small, fiercely loyal international following know that.

"Words diminish the essence of Tank Girl," explains Rachel Talalay, director of the upcoming feature film inspired by the Girl's comic strip appearances in the U.K.'s *Deadline* magazine, and published by Dark Horse Comics in the U.S. "The best way to understand her is to look at just one frame of the comic. That says so much more than any bull I could spout."

Set in the year 2033 (or thereabouts), after a comet has hit the Earth, causing global catastrophes, the film explores a world in which water is as valuable as gold. Tank Girl (Lori Petty) and her friends, including a band of mutant kangaroo outlaws known as the Rippers, will do whatever they can to monkey with the evil Department of Water, who monopolize the valuable resource. "Tank Girl isn't a superhero," says Talalay. "She doesn't have superpowers and she's not the woman who can beat the shit out of everybody. She uses other ways to get what she wants. The essence of Tank Girl is that she could be me when I was a kid and I was sent to the principal's office, only where I always would cry, she'd be in his face the whole time. Tank Girl is the alter-ego of a lot of teenagers, not just girls, but boys too."

Talay's first hurdle in getting *Tank Girl* off the ground was convincing a studio that not only can a woman be an action hero, but that *Tank Girl* could hop into bed with a

mutant kangaroo named Booga (played by Jeff Kober of TV's *China Beach*) and still get something other than an X rating. "We tried to walk that fine line of pushing the envelope, but also saying that the movie is going to be funny and cool and not just so weird that it won't work," she says.

After two years in development, Talalay found a home for *Tank Girl* at the newly restructured MGM/UA. "John Calley, who was very much responsible for movies from a much more visionary period—like *A Clockwork Orange* and *Performance*—was very supportive of our ideas for *Tank Girl*," she says.

No stranger to the workings of a studio, Talalay served in various capacities at New Line Cinema, where she cut her teeth on such weird and varied fare as the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies, as well as the John Waters features *Cry-Baby* and *Hairspray*, which she produced. Talalay made the transition to directing with 1991's *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*, then followed it up with the similarly-molded cyber-thriller *Ghost in the Machine* in 1993.

With *Tank Girl*, Talalay had finally found a project she could call her own. After her stepdaughter gave her the Penguin graphic novel for Christmas four years ago, she fell immediately in love with the character and shepherded the story from concept to shooting script to finished film, keeping the tone true to the irreverent, inventive, sometimes nihilistic, always surprising comic, written by Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin. "We started with a pretty basic good-against-evil story, then just threw in the kitchen sink in terms of trying to make it as cool and different as the comic book," Talalay notes. "*Tank Girl* is so outrageous on the page that she's harder to translate to the screen than a Batman or a Superman—a lot harder."

Because she so respected their original vision of *Tank Girl's* world, Talalay involved Hewlett and Martin in many aspects of the production, including story, design, makeup, and special effects. "It really mattered to me because when I was convincing them that I was the right person to bring *Tank Girl* to the silver screen, I said, 'I want to keep you involved.' I didn't want to simply get the rights from them and then say, 'OK, goodbye, sorry,'" she says.

Hewlett helped in the production design of both the Department of Water, which Talalay describes as "very austere and *Blade Runner*-ish," and the *Tank Girl* world, which closely resembles the comic strip. "One thing I love about Jamie's designs are that there are fifty things on each frame," says Talalay. "There are fifty little details, including a little caricature of himself in a corner. We can never get that wonderful richness of a page of the comic, but we absolutely went for the essence of his crazy, wonderful world."

The production design team, lead by Catherine Hard-

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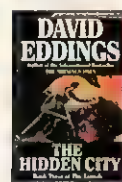
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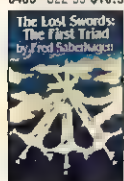
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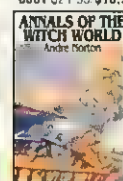
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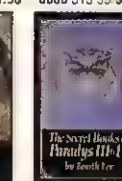
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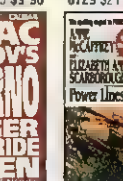
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wicke, got to work on bringing Hewlett's elaborately imagined tanks and jets into tangible form. "We had a person here, Simon Merton, who took Jamie's drawings and met them with practical considerations," Talalay explains. "He took this absolute insane, impossible-to-afford tank that's straight out of Jamie's imagination and figured out how to alter a real tank, while still keeping the essence of Jamie."

Their efforts paid off the first time Hewlett and Martin visited the set. Talalay describes the comic's creators as being extremely nervous, but also "like a couple of kids in a candy shop. They said, 'This is the ultimate compliment, seeing our work in real life.' They were thrilled with what we'd done, which was wonderful for me because I was very nervous."

Another critical task was casting the title role. After a much publicized series of casting calls in Los Angeles, New York and London, and the widely reported early departure of Emily Lloyd, who had initially been cast in the title role, Talalay was forced into an eleventh-hour decision which she now counts as a blessing.

Best known for her roles in *A League of Their Own* and *Point Break*, Lori Petty epitomizes the tough-yet-vulnerable qualities Talalay was seeking for Tank Girl. "What Lori brings to the role is not only comedy—because she is a great comedian—but real warmth," says the director. "A lot of people we met in the casting calls would have been perfect if we were doing a three-minute short



Tank Girl (left) with Naomi Watts as her pal Jet Girl face a nightmarish future.

where Tank Girl could step right off the comic book page and be that tough-as-nails, in-your-face Australian punk; but if you watched two hours of that, it would be like, enough! Stop! Lori's got that edge, but that's not all she's got—she has all the other dimensions, including an emotional dimension. You've got to know that she cares about people."

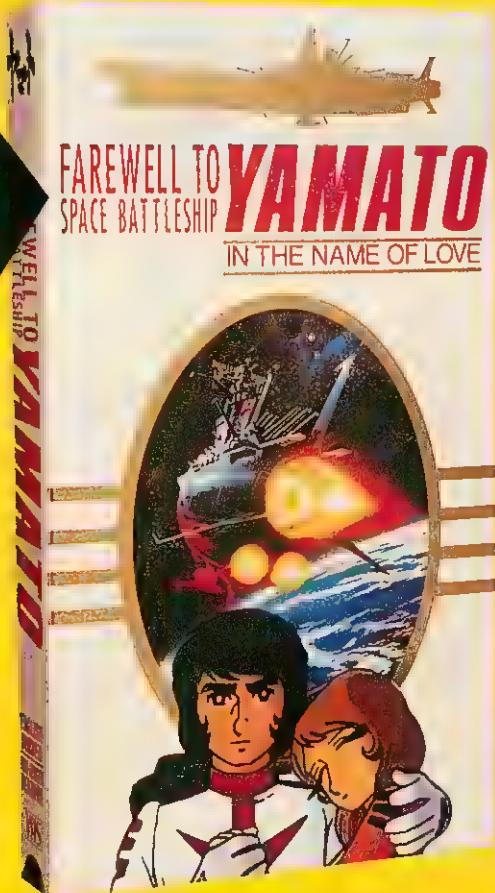
For a picture of this scope, the filmmakers

needed a full-service effects team. After having seen new-edge effects technologies at work in the making of *Freddy's Dead* and *Ghost in the Machine*, Talalay had fun with this aspect of the production. She hired effects veterans Bob and Denny Skotak of 4-Ward Productions to handle the miniatures and some of the other physical effects. "I have done a lot of special effects on much smaller budgets under much more difficult circumstances," she says. "So in a way the effects aspect, while still incredibly challenging, was not this big, nightmarish puzzle that's going to go out of control. I'm not going to diminish the incredible importance of the effects, but we were never overwhelmed by them. We've got some digital work and some stuff that we're still creating...I love that stuff."

Talalay had specific design ideas of how to bring Hewlett's vision of the Rippers (a gang of mutant kangaroos) to life. "I didn't want my kangaroo people to be like the Mutant Ninja Turtles where you can only tell the difference between them if you're either six years old or know what color headband each wears," she says. "That became an interesting studio issue. Do you want to pay this kind of money for an actor who you're then going to completely cover in makeup? I wanted to design makeups that were very individualized and very much a part of the actors' faces. One of the Rippers is played by (rapper/action star) Ice T, and even though he's wearing a full

Continued on page 92

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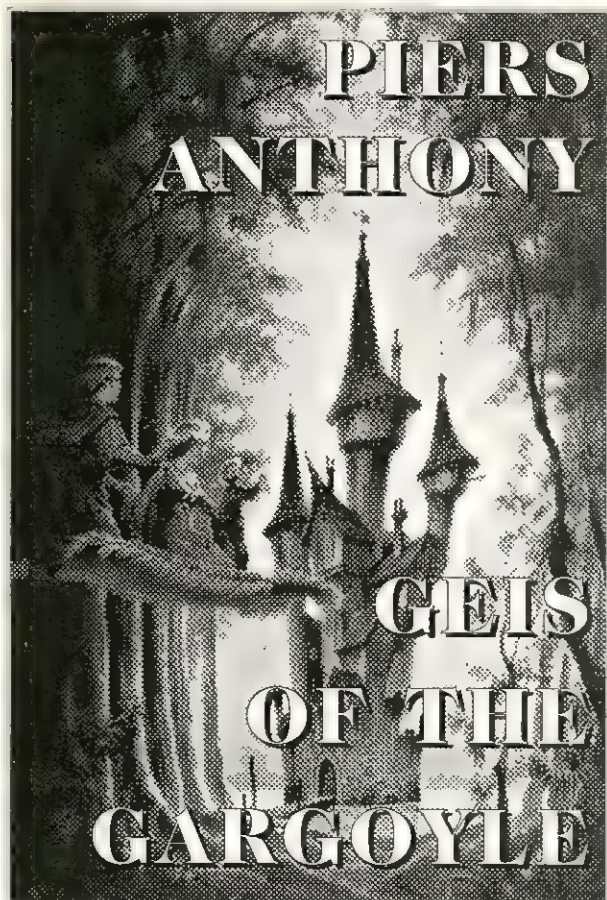
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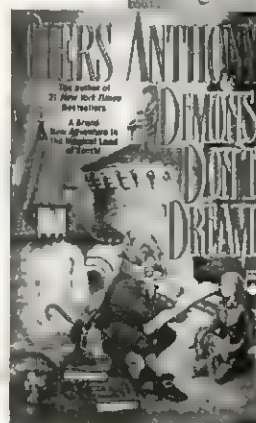
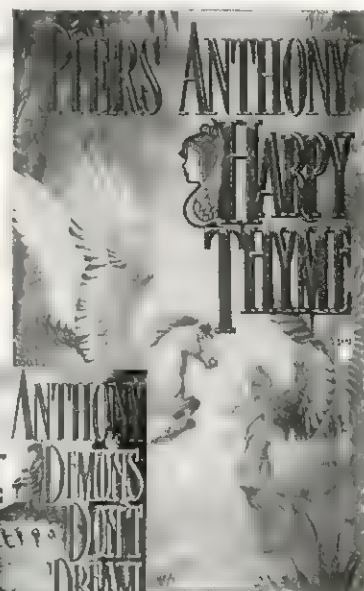
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VOYAGING TO THE STARS HAS BEEN A DREAM OF SCIENCE fiction writers, and indeed of all humanity, for centuries. But the stars are distant, and Einstein's theories appear to forbid traveling at speeds exceeding light. SF writers often postulate some sort of magical future scientific advance that will allow us to get around Einstein's barrier, one which will let us reach the stars in a few days (as was discussed in our November 1994 Science Forum). However some scientists aren't willing to wait for magic, but are planning and engineering clever new ways to get to the stars *now*, without warp drive.

SF writer, scientist and *Science Fiction Age* Science feature regular Geoffrey A. Landis recently attended the scientific conference "Practical Robotic Starflight: Are We Ready?", sponsored by the Planetary Society, where leading scientists gathered to discuss exactly this topic. After the third day of the conference, he caught up with three attendees who are both scientists and SF writers. Three-time Hugo winning writer David Brin is also a physicist; among his scientific publications is one of the most complete studies of the Fermi paradox in the *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society*. Space scientist Jonathan Vos Post was the mission planning engineer on the *Voyager* Uranus Interstellar Mission, responsible for planning the Miranda fly-by and other items. Dr. Robert Forward is equally prominent in both SF, where he is known for combining rigorous scientific

backgrounds with free-wheeling speculation, and in the field of astronautics, where as a senior scientist for Hughes Laboratories, he led studies of advanced propulsion for future space missions.

SF AGE: How do science fiction writers treat interstellar flight?

BRIN: Typically with warp drive or other technologies that are essentially magic, that assume some physics far beyond what we know today. I do see encouraging signs in recent years. Science fiction writers are starting to use such space warps less. They aren't going cold turkey, but they're cutting down, like going from a three-pack-a-day habit to one pack a week or so.

FORWARD: I spend most of my time trying to figure out a new way to get to the stars that is at least plausible, and doesn't involve too much magic. I try to live with the limitations of the fact that it takes time to get up to anywhere near the speed of light, and time to travel between the stars, even at nearly the speed of light. Because that is what the human race has to face: you can't accelerate at more than 3 G's for long periods of time. To get up to anywhere near the speed of light requires traveling at 1 G for a year, or 3 G's for a third of a year, or—in *Timemaster*, for instance, I had my hero going at 30 G's, in an emergency situation, breathing liquid, and suffering for months in order to get up to near the speed of light. That was part of the story; that was part of the realism. The mechanism I used was like magic—it happened to be negative matter—but I still had the problem that you can't move people at high accelerations, and they don't live very long compared to the time it takes them to travel between the stars. You can use the difficulties of real space flight positively in science fiction to generate plot possibilities.

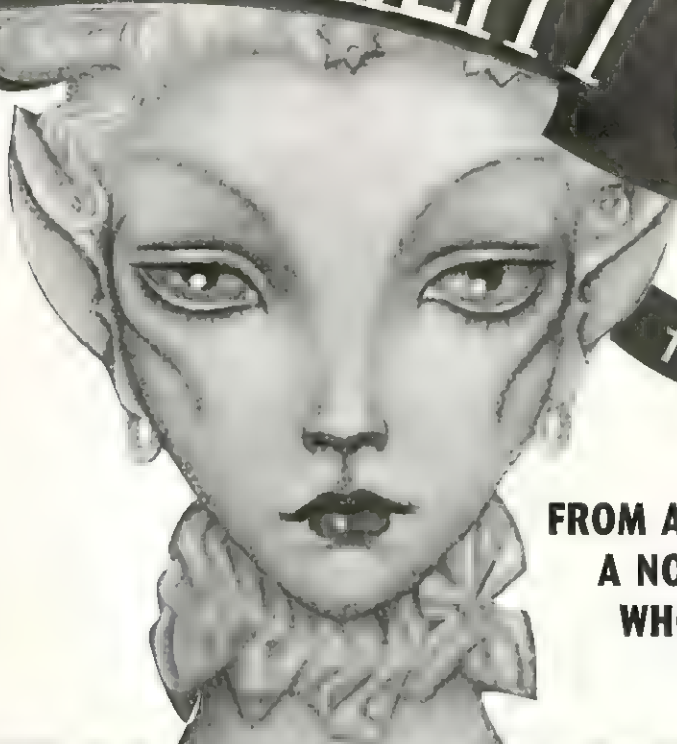
POST: There's a lot of engineering to be worked out, but there must be at least a hundred ways to the stars using physics that we know. There must be many more ways to the stars using physics that we don't yet know, without having to violate Saint Albert Einstein.

FORWARD: Saint Einstein, as you say, also gave us miracles; he gave us the possibilities of space warps and time machines and faster than light travel. I'll stick with him. He's our prophet.

BRIN: Still, those are only fun speculations for now. Einstein's main lesson is that the speed of light is a tough traffic cop. It does not allow us, in a story, to have the heroine kiss her sweetheart, go off and save the universe, and then come back home in time for dinner. On the other hand, there are many phenomena of relativity that make great story images. If you can approach the speed of light, you begin to experience some of the strange effects of special relativity, such as time dilation. This is illustrated by the well-known twin paradox, where one twin leaves the Earth, goes off at relativistic velocity, and comes back the same day, as far as he's concerned, but a hundred years have passed on the Earth, and his brother's in a retirement home.

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POST: Robert Heinlein wrote one of the first good twin paradox novels, *Time for the Stars*. One twin comes home to marry the granddaughter of the other twin.

BRIN: As you get close to the speed of light, you don't perceive any change in your own mass, but as far as the rest of the universe is concerned, you've gotten a hell of a lot heavier, so it gets harder and harder to push yourself that added little bit. What Forward did, and Charles Sheffield did in *One Man's Universe*, was to take away one of the problems of relativistic travel by assuming some now-unknown energy source could power your spaceship. They deal in different ways with the problem of how to accelerate past 3 G's. These are actually wonderfully weird aspects of nature, and it is too bad that other authors have avoided dealing with them for so long by being suckered into the sweet temptation of a warp drive that lets us treat a spaceship like an airplane.

POST: Albert Einstein played the violin; he was clearly an artist. As a science fiction author, he had great backgrounds but lacked plot and character. The bongo-playing saint

of physics, my late co-author, Richard Feynman, suspected that there might be an infinite number of natural laws to this universe. If so, there might be an infinite number of ways to travel to the stars.

SF AGE: What is the biggest obstacle to plans for starflight?

FORWARD: The difficulty of paying for it. We have plenty of ideas for going to the stars. Antimatter rockets aren't that far away. The other rockets, such as fission and fusion rockets, ended up being quite slow. If you had to, you could go that way, but it would take you hundreds of years, it would take you generations.

BRIN: Or send small robots.

FORWARD: Yes, that's right. Which gives us another option: if it's too costly to send a human crew, how small can we make a spacecraft, get it up to speed, and still have it do something interesting when it gets there? Jordin Kare summarized efforts on making spacecraft instruments smaller and smaller. He described a series of three generations of instruments, basically cameras, to take pictures. The camera shrank from being bread-box-sized, to something about the size of a

dental floss canister, and finally to the size of a sugar cube. But it was stuck with this huge barrel of a lens, which you need to take a good picture of a planet from somewhere in the solar system. We were stuck by the laws of optics. We couldn't make a camera which weighed a picogram or a milligram. We could make the electronics that small, but we couldn't make the light collecting apparatus that small.

BRIN: Unless, of course, we find a way to do something like inflatable lenses, or these smoky solids, aerogels.

SF AGE: How much more ambitious would a star probe be than earlier probes such as *Voyager*?

BRIN: Dr. Rich Terrell of JPL [Jet Propulsion Laboratory] came up with an allegory to show how great the distances beyond Pluto are. He poured the contents of a salt container onto a table and said it would take two hundred such containers to make a billion grains of salt. There are five hundred billion stars in the galaxy. If you then spread the salt out to scale, as thinly as stars are spread out, here in the periphery of the galaxy, the nearest salt grain to the one you held in your hand would be seven miles away. We already have an interstellar space probe, *Voyager*. It's leaving the solar system all right, but on this scale, it's departing at the rate that grass grows.

POST: We have four interstellar space probes right now, *Pioneer 11*, *Pioneer 12*, *Voyager 1*, and *Voyager 2*. And they cost hun-

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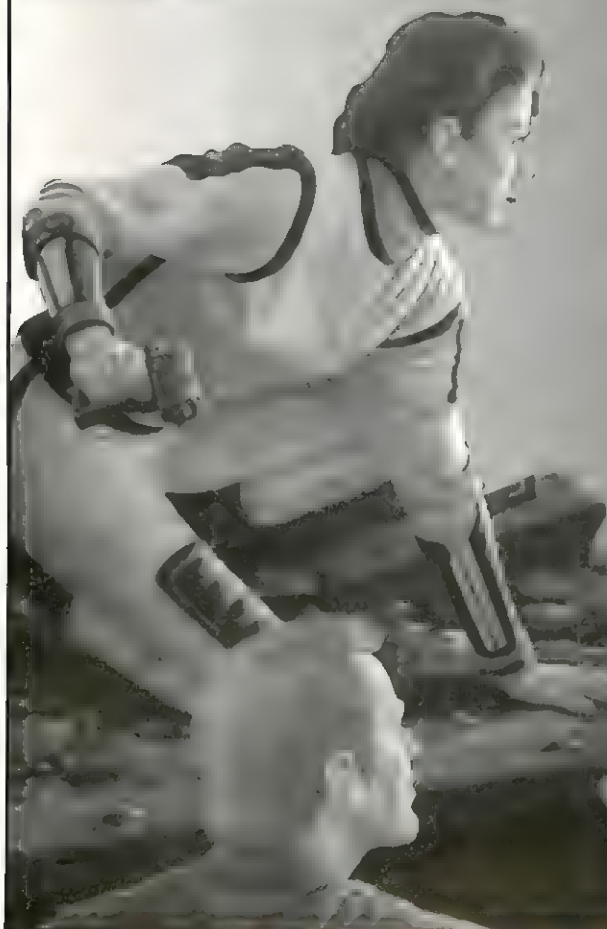
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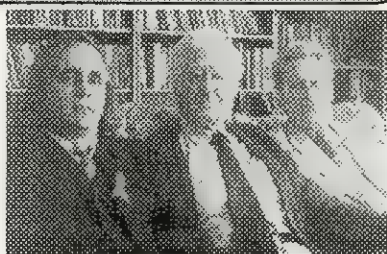
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dreds of millions of dollars each. One of the questions at this conference is, what does it cost us to go to the stars? The stars are our destiny, but can we pay the bill? The largest cost I heard in the last few days was quadrillions of dollars, enough to make every man, woman, and child on this planet a millionaire. The lowest cost I heard was 10 million dollars for an interstellar robotic probe, assuming of course that we have already exploited the solar system to get hydrogen from Jupiter and uranium from the asteroids. Ten million means that a twenty-first century yuppie could go to the stars. The truth is somewhere in between. One thing that people seem to agree on is that if we are going to use uranium or plutonium at all, better to use it as far away from home as possible. Right now a lot of people are worrying about asteroids or comets that might hit the Earth the way Jupiter was recently bombarded. It's a legitimate thing that even the Congress of the United States admits should be investigated. Arthur C. Clarke suggested that the way to find bits of rubble in the solar system that might smack into us is to make a 1,000 megaton bomb, maybe even a 1 million megaton bomb, go around to the far side of the sun from Earth, and then blow up the enormous superbomb. The sun would shield us from the radiation, but the solar system would be bombarded with very intense microwaves, and we would look for the reflected microwaves and be able to spot anything bigger than a golf ball in the solar system. I would just like to add to Arthur C. Clarke's remarkable proposal that you would get the same effect by exploding several thousand smaller atomic bombs or hydrogen bombs and driving a spacecraft, the so-called "Orion" spacecraft, out of the solar system at the same time. You would not only save the Earth from collision and get rid of old bombs, but you would also get someone, or something, out to the stars.

FORWARD: Actually, it's not a bad idea, because the one interstellar vehicle that we could have built twenty years ago was the atomic-bomb-powered Orion vehicle.

BRIN: I have heard that there are enough warheads in the arsenals of the United States and the former Soviet Union that if we beat them all into plowshares and used them all for Orion ships, we could send a mass equivalent to the United States Navy to Mars.

SF AGE: What are some of the other possibilities for ways that we might get to the stars with real technology that we know today?

BRIN: All sorts of possibilities have been discussed. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the image of a fiery antimatter rocket is the idea of sending a little "Starwisp" spacecraft streaking out of the solar system. This was originally Bob Forward's notion; a broad, very light sail that takes a focused microwave beam to drive this little one-ounce spacecraft. The microwave beam sends it hurtling across the starscape.

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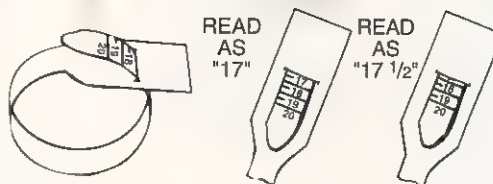


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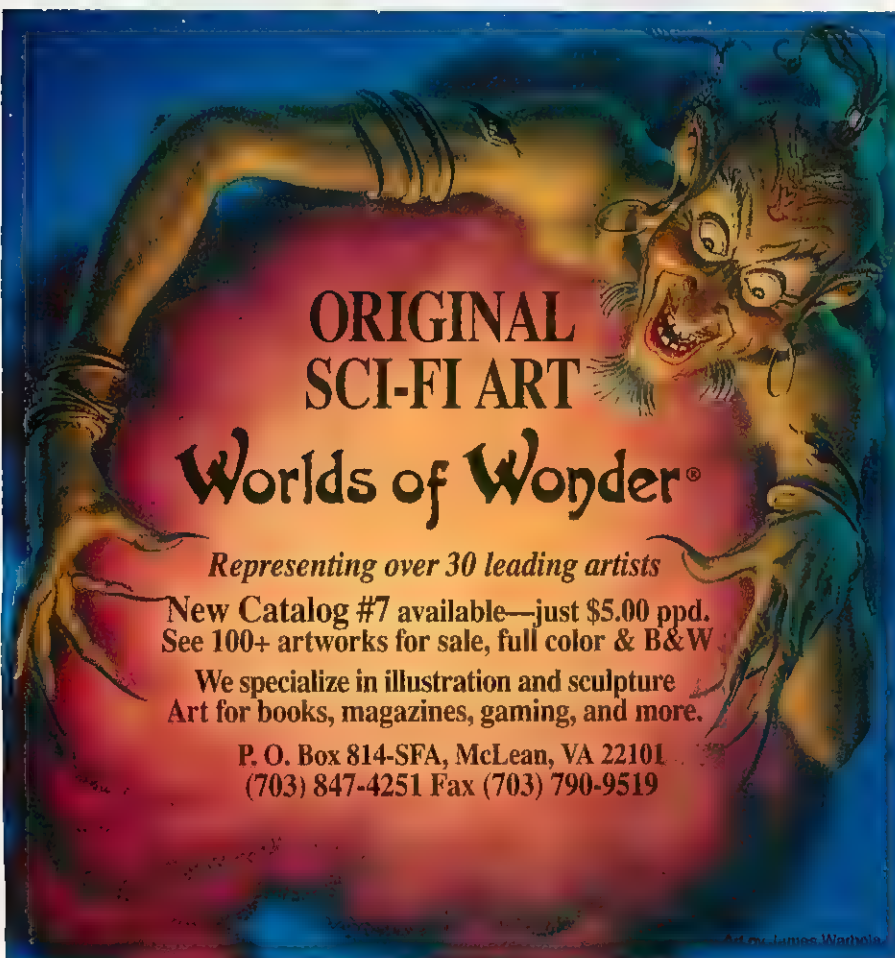
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Art by James Worthen

frey Landis have proposed: particle-beam propulsion. The basic idea is to have a particle beam generator stuck to an asteroid (because you can't use it on the Earth—the atmosphere gets in the way, and once it gets firing, it has a lot of recoil, so you have to put it on something heavy). So you take an asteroid and you build your particle beam generator, and you beam both positive particles and negative particles out into space—

BRIN: You make your vehicle a hoop.

FORWARD: Right, a hoop. And you put current through it to make a strong magnetic field, and when the charged particles come, they hit the magnetic field, and they give the magnetic field a push, and it gives the wire a push, and the wire gives the spacecraft a push, and so that's the way you get up to speed.

BRIN: This is a variant of the idea of sending a microwave beam—Forward's Star-wisp—or of hitting a solar sail with a laser.

FORWARD: Beamed power propulsion.

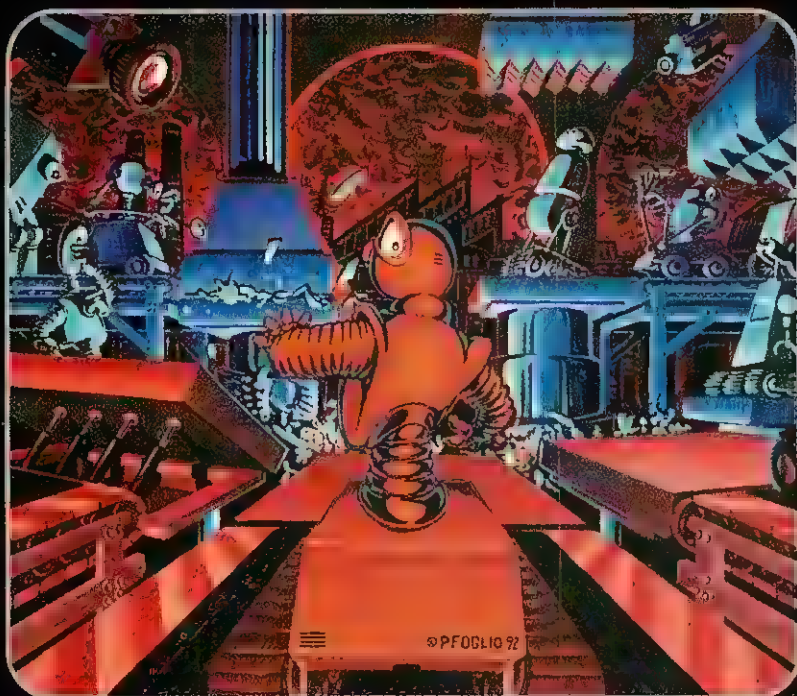
BRIN: What all three of these ideas have in common is that you can send a ship out that doesn't have to carry its own energy, doesn't have to carry its own fuel. Because the biggest problem in approaching the speed of light is that you not only have to accelerate your own ship, but you have to accelerate the fuel that you're going to use for later acceleration. So people have been swinging over to this idea that the best way to reach the stars is to have a home base shoot power out to you, whether by particle beams, lasers, or microwaves.

FORWARD: I think that after years of study, it's now very obvious that if you want to go to the stars, don't use rockets. You have to use something else. Beamed power is one way.

The beauty about this engine is that, unlike some of the ideas I've had where you push it with lasers or microwaves, is that when you enter the target solar system, you can use it as a drag brake against the solar wind to slow down and stop, without doing anything fancy except re-energizing the magnetic loop.

POST: In fact, any kind of interstellar craft can use a magnetic sail to brake. So we're talking about hybrids, good ideas that combine two other good ideas. The ancestor of the magnetic sail was the interstellar ramjet of Robert Bussard. Many people played with that concept, which uses interstellar hydrogen as freely available fuel, but the scoop to collect the hydrogen seems to produce more drag than thrust. James Stephens of JPL tried to patent the magsail first, under the name 'loopsat.' When I worked for Dana Andrews on Boeing's 1981 survey of advanced propulsion, I tried to hybridize huge superconducting loops with ion drives and considered trajectories through the Earth's magnetotail, the Jovian magnetosphere, and the Io Flux tube. Bob Zubrin deserves credit as father of the magsail—he derived the essential equations—but the idea has many grandfathers, and clearly Bussard is the great-grandfather.

BRIN: So, what do we have so far? We have the original idea to leave the solar system using chemical rockets, illustrated by Voy-



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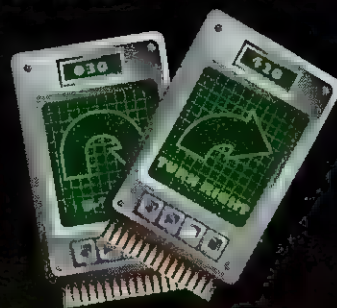
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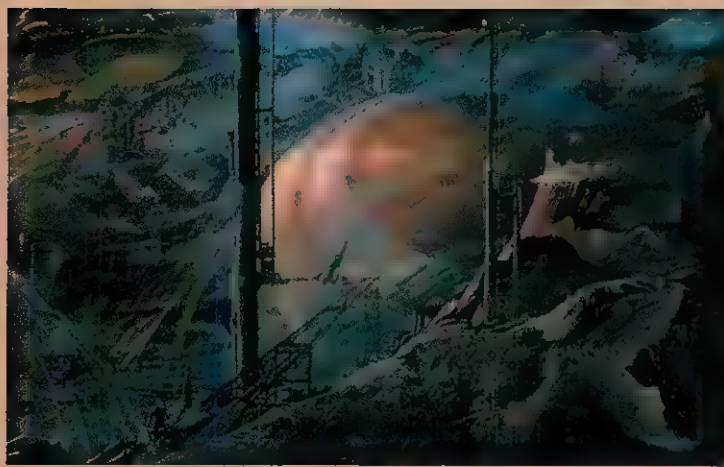
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POST: It may be premature to give up on rockets completely. They're a mature technology; we've been flying them since the eleventh century. The most efficient rocket is an 'autophage,' a rocket that eats itself. My paper at this conference suggests building spaceships out of frozen hydrogen, which is first a structural material, then a radiation shield, and finally a fuel.

FORWARD: The thing that's new is that we're beginning to push the minimum size of the spacecraft down below a ton. And that's important too. Because before now it used to be a ton or more, plus propellant, plus engine, and now we're beginning to realize that we can make a payload that's at least tens or hundreds of kilograms that can do a lot. I think that *Clementine* taught us that.

POST: Or even less. I think that the ideal payload will be the size of a bacterium. It gets to the next star system, reproduces itself from available interplanetary dust, then builds bigger and bigger gadgets from asteroidal material, which include planetary landers and communications gear to report to Earth, and then makes an interstellar spacecraft factory to send probes outward into the universe.

SF AGE: When does it seem likely that we might be able to send the first human interstellar probes?

FORWARD: I think that even with the new ideas that we have about making spacecraft smaller, and making the propulsion system

Continued on page 103

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The movies invented typecasting, but SF made it an art.



Typecasting limits the roles of some actors. It's hard to picture George Takei (at the helm) playing any part but that of Lieutenant Sulu. Ditto for Walter Koenig playing anyone but Ensign Pavel Chekov.

IN HOLLYWOOD'S EARLY YEARS, STORYTELLING WAS relatively primitive. There was no sound, no color, picture quality was often unreliable, film stock was often unstable, and audiences were generally unsophisticated. Until D.W. Griffith invented the feature, most films didn't last more than twenty minutes. Stories had to be kept simple and obvious. It had to be plain, even to semi-literate clods, just what was going on in those flickering, sometimes blurry, black-and-white images.

One way to keep things clear was to use stereotyped characters, the stock figures of melodrama. A film would have a hero who would be tall and handsome and manly; a villain, who would be dark and oily and treacherous; a heroine, who would be sweet and virginal. There were also optional characters such as the vamp, dark and seductive, or the sidekick, short and bumbling.

The actors who played these various roles, in those early days before there were movie stars, were treated as interchangeable commodities. A producer wouldn't want a specific actor for a role; he'd want a *type*. A cowboy, an ingenue, a villain, an inscrutable Oriental, whatever. Actors, therefore, tried to fit the types. You didn't succeed in Hollywood by being versatile; you succeeded by playing one role, but playing it to perfection.

Movies eventually evolved beyond their origins. Features became the dominant form. Sound came in, and color. Audiences became more sophisticated and could accept an actor playing against type, or an actor who simply wasn't any one type.

But typecasting is still a limiting factor for plenty of actors. A classic example is the cast of the original *Star Trek*—William Shatner has been able to go on to other roles, such as T.J. Hooker, but I've never met anyone who can see George Takei without thinking of Sulu, or watch

Walter Koenig without thinking of Chekov. As a result, their acting careers haven't exactly blossomed in the past twenty-five years. Other actors aren't trapped in a single character, but play the same general type over and over—sometimes willingly, sometimes because it's all they can get. I don't think John Wayne ever wanted to play Hamlet, and no one would ask him to; he didn't mind being typecast. Marilyn Monroe wasn't as happy about being seen as a dumb blonde and tried hard to break out of that niche.

This isn't news to anyone who's grown up in America in the second half of the twentieth century. What *might* be news, though, is that it's not just actors who are typecast. It happens to performers and artists of every kind.

It happens to writers.

This came as a surprise to me. When I was growing up, I read a lot of books and stories—not just science fiction, but anything and everything, though with an emphasis on science fiction. I noticed there were some authors who turned up all over the place, while others stuck to a single genre. Sure, everything I saw with Robert Heinlein's name on it was science fiction (I missed the few exceptions), but Robert Sheckley and Fredric Brown wrote mysteries, Andre Norton wrote romances, and Fritz Leiber wrote hard SF and horror and heroic fantasy with equal brilliance.

I thought that that was normal, right and proper; after all, good writing is good writing. Unfortunately, readers don't see it that way anymore. Nowadays, once an author becomes known at all, his name is seen as a brand name, and readers expect everything with that brand to be pretty much the same. The days when John D. Macdonald or Fredric Brown could write SF, then turn around and write mysteries, are gone. To readers and retailers now, picking up a book by an established SF writer and finding out that it's a mystery would be like buying a bag labeled "Hershey" and finding jelly beans inside.

This is not fun for writers.

I can see how it came about, though. Back in the pulps, the reader bought on the basis of the pulp's title, not the author's name—a reader who bought *Dime Mystery* or *Astounding Science Fiction* or *Zeppelin Stories* knew what he was getting, so the same author could write for all three mags without upsetting anyone.

People who read books didn't worry much about genre back then; they expected quality and were willing to read a variety of things so long as they were good. *Brave New World* sure looks like science fiction in retrospect, but it sold to the general fiction market.

After the pulps died the situation began shifting. Genre fiction moved into paperbacks, and then hardcovers, and the genre readers followed it. The publishers helped them find what they wanted by labeling books—a little rocket on the spine meant science fiction, a skull meant mystery, and so on. And in time, the bookstores began to sort the books out for the buyers, putting all the SF in one place, all the Westerns in another, and so on. And the trouble started. Because bookstore clerks, if in doubt, would

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sort by author's name. "Asimov? He writes science fiction. That's where readers will look for him. I don't care that *Murder at the ABA* sounds like a mystery, put it in SF!"

Whatever an author becomes known for, that's what he's expected to do forever after.

Stephen King has mentioned several times, notably in the introduction to *Different Seasons*, that he's been typed as a horror writer, and that even when he writes stuff that wouldn't be considered horror if it were by someone else, it's marketed as horror because it's by Stephen King.

I've been told that some of Dean Koontz' recent novels are straight science fiction—but since they're by Dean Koontz, they're marketed as horror.

Stephen Donaldson, after the immense success of the *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, wanted to write a murder mystery and discovered that he effectively couldn't—Stephen Donaldson was a fantasy writer. Only by using another name entirely and accepting a tiny advance could he sell a mystery.

Some authors have fought long and hard against typecasting—Harlan Ellison comes immediately to mind. He's always insisted that he is simply a *writer*, not a science fiction writer—yet when Ace reissued much of his work in the early 1980s, he had to threaten a lawsuit to get them to live up to a contractual agreement to not put "Science Fiction" on the spine of every book.

I've run up against typecasting myself—I'm

typed as a fantasy writer and find it much harder to sell SF or horror novels than fantasy novels. The SF and horror get better reviews, but it's the fantasy that sells best.

And I can't sell mysteries at all. It hardly seems fair.

There are ways around it, of course; Donaldson did write a mystery or two under another name. And there's one woman I know who writes fantasy under one name, romance under another, and Westerns under a third. But the problem with *that* approach is that readers who admire her fantasy will probably never realize that the romances and Westerns are by the same woman; they won't hunt them down. Of course, that assumes there are readers out there who *read* fantasy, romances, *and* Westerns. I'd like to think there are; I *hope* there are.

After all, good writing is good writing. Much as I love fantasy and science fiction, I find it depressing to talk to fans who read nothing else. It seems so narrow—and isn't science fiction supposed to appeal to people with open, wide-ranging minds?

I've had interviewers ask me who my own favorite authors are, and then react with surprise when I name Dorothy Sayers and C.S. Forester instead of SF writers; perhaps this means that people like me, who read in many genres, really are a rarity nowadays.

Boy, that's a depressing thought!

Once upon a time an educated person was expected to have read virtually all the impor-

tant works in Western literature; that's obviously impossible now, with thousands of new books published every year. A reader can't even keep up with all the SF being published.

I'd have thought the solution was to sample a little of everything—that's been my approach. Apparently, though, most people instead find one thing they like and stick with it. They'll find a few authors they like, and read everything they can find by those few, ignoring all the rest and, it seems, complaining bitterly when their chosen few do something radically different from what they've done before. How boring!

I wish I had a solution to the problem of typecasting; I wish *somebody* had a solution. In Hollywood, an actor can risk his career by turning down every part until someone casts him against type—but it's a huge risk, putting his entire career on the line. In publishing, a writer can take the time to write an out-of-genre novel—but the chances are it'll wind up sitting in a drawer, unsold.

It shouldn't be that way. I ask you all, as readers, to give authors a chance to stretch their wings—and to give your mind a chance to stretch, as well. Don't keep them in the straitjackets of specific marketing categories. Read in other genres. Search out out-of-genre works by your favorite authors. The finest performances often come when actors are cast against type! Give those writers who dare to try something new a chance! □



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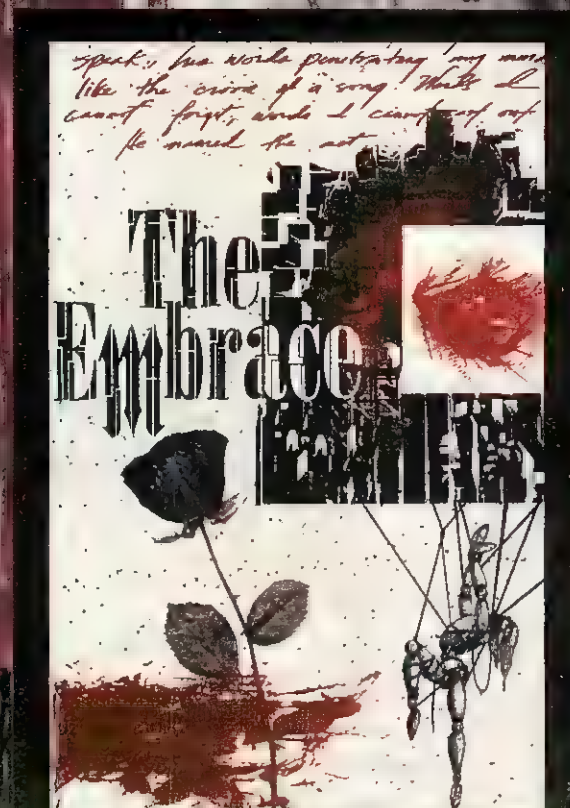
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The S'hudonni promised to transform an aging quarterback into the galaxy's most famous entertainer.
Would the Super Bowl champion pay the price?

BY RICK WILBER

Illustration by Jon Foster

TWOCLICKS, THE SLIMY S'hudonni bastard, knew just how to make me his. There was a time when it was my body that brought me fame. In college, in the NFL, there were golden moments, perfect passes to receivers in mid-stride. Championships. Do you remember the Super Bowl where I completed six in a row in that final last-minute drive? I can still picture that final pass, the ball rotating in slow motion, Ahmad's hands rising to meet it, touching it lovingly, hanging on as he fell into the end zone, the ref's arms rising triumphant, the joy, the pure joy.

And the women. Oh, God, it was so easy, there were so many it became an ordinary part of life, an expectation. The women, each cuter, prettier, more glamorous than the one before, all of

them willing—by the dozens, by the hundreds maybe. There was no counting.

Ah, yes. Robert Mack, Super Bowl quarterback, king of all I could survey—the endorsements; the commercials; a beautiful, brainy wife; a life of fame and sex and riches; a golden future. I had it, then.

And then the left knee. And the right shoulder. And the rehab and then the shattered elbow. And that, as the sportswriters said, was that—a career-ender.

Overnight I was forgotten. Oh, I was still a local hero in our town, still spoke to Rotary meetings and did the color commentary for the team and had my talk radio sports show, you know the drill.

But, basically, it was over. I even lost Susan then, drove her away. It was my darkest moment, that night she left. I had lost it all, could sink no lower.



And then came Twoclicks.

I had just finished speaking to the chamber of commerce of one of our suburban towns, offering a few stories from the old days, dropping names, just generally reminiscing—I kept it going for a good thirty minutes.

There was an audience of maybe one hundred, and they paid me a nice little fee to go along with the rubber chicken. To be honest, I enjoyed the feeling of being up in front of them, of being *me* again, the famous quarterback. It was all a pale imitation of what it had been, packed stadiums and all that. But it was better than nothing.

I finished, and then came the applause. Too polite. No energy. I sighed, thanked them, took a few questions from the floor, signed a few copies of the autobiography I had pretended to write a few years before, and then headed to the bar.

Twoclicks was waiting for me there.

I had seen him in the audience when I gave my speech, occupying two seats in the back. I had ignored him, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of being noticed.

They are hard to miss, the S'hudonni, all pasty white and porpoise huge, with those tiny little legs and arms and that huge bulbous body. They always look tightly packed to me, as if the skin can barely fit over the blubber. In high school, we had a kid who played left tackle who looked something like that. We called him Bubba.

You don't, of course, call a S'hudonni "Bubba."

LIKE MOST PEOPLE, I DIDN'T CARE FOR the S'hudonni. Like everyone else I was shocked at those first landings, expected the world to change, maybe to end. I

mean, they have so much power, are so far beyond what we can know or do that surely, I thought, they came to take over.

But then they didn't do much, really, did they? They wandered around, looked us over, made some speeches, and made some vague promises about their empire and how we could get into it.

And then nothing, they faded into the woodwork, and we slowly began to quit worrying about them; life went on as it had. For me, that meant football, analyzing the play of others, sounding like I cared. The S'hudonni just weren't much on my mind.

And then came Twoclicks. He waddled over to me as I came through the half-glassed door of the bar. "I sshould like a word with you, pleass," he said to me in that sibilant, lispy voice of theirs.

He bought us drinks, a draft beer for me and a soft drink for himself. So, I thought, it is true what I'd heard about the S'hudonni and carbonation, that it leaves them mildly intoxicated.

"Your career iss not what it once wass," he said simply after the waiter brought us our glasses.

I smiled. He was certainly blurt.

"You were once a famous athlete, a quarterback, a fine thrower, I am told," he said to me in that lispy hiss. He was the first of our space-age visitors I had ever talked to and I was surprised that he'd learned English. Later, as I struggled to learn the clicks and whistles of his tongue, I found out he'd learned my language in a one-hour session with the cap. Like most of their technology, the cap was unavailable to Earthies.

"A fine passer," I said, and tried to smile. "Yes, for a while there I was pretty good. I didn't know the S'hudonni cared about such things."

"Oh," he said, "we do care. Very much. It is the entertainments, the imagination, that iss the very besst of your culture."

I could only smile. The best of our culture? Well, perhaps. I thought it pretty funny, though, to think of football as something of interest to weird aliens on strange planets.

But Twoclicks was dead serious.

"I have work for you," he said, and then sipped on his cola, burped once, and spoke. "It iss better work, I think, than what you do now."

He waved off my attempt to interrupt and defend my current life. "There iss need for an entertainer for a certain," he hesitated, chose

his word carefully, "project. There is need for ssomeone who can quarterback," and he smiled that porpoise grin, "this project. Someone who can lead as emotions come to life, someone who has certain ssensibilities."

"Sensibilities?"

"Thiss entertainer needs to know well about your ssexuality, your reproduction and its emotions."

I laughed. "Reproduction," I said, "sure. What you are looking for, then, is a pornographer."

He stared blankly; the word didn't translate easily into the S'hudonni language.

Then he laughed, with that barking sound that seems so grating to human ears.

"Yess," he agreed, "a pornographer. A very good one, that iss what I need. And I understand you are the besst one for that. You are very active in ssex? You know it well? This is what I have been told."

This was certainly blunt, but the S'hudonni are known for that. And yes, I had a certain reputation. The women weren't quite as glamorous anymore, but I still did all right. I prided myself on it. In fact, my hostess from that afternoon's speech would be in my bed later that night, I was certain. She had sent all the right signals, and she was attractive enough. When she slipped me her phone number and said how much she'd enjoyed the speech, I knew my evening was taken care of.

It would be so easy for someone like me, he explained. First, S'hudonni technicians would implant a receiver behind the mandible of a target, of "ssomeone we think will be of interest to our audience," he said.

Then I would hook into that receiver, flow into that person, in a sense, and become them, know them, share their thoughts and emotions, feel their fears and joys. And pass them along to receivers on all of the Seven Worlds.

That was the job, you see, to transmit a little Earthie culture to an audience that was hooked in all over our little part of the galaxy. And, of course, the only part of our culture that Twoclicks thought they might find interesting was sex.

"We need someone," he said, "who can stay in control and yet let the emotions through, you ssee. You will need to learn to alter what you sense, edit it, work with it to make it the sstory it sshould be for our audience. You understand?"

I laughed. He was crazy, of course, and what I'd have to do was figure a polite way out of this.

And then he said that, in return, he could promise me two things. One, an enormous salary. It would be more money than I could ever spend.

And, he paused and smiled that vicious smile, I would be famous, more famous than any quarterback, any athlete had ever been. I would be the first, the most famous, entertainer from Earth.

"They will know you on all the Seven," he said. "You will be the only Earthie they know, you and the people you send them."

"And here, on Earth?"

"Here, too, someday, perhaps, when the Earthies are ready and can afford the technology it takes to receive. Until then, no, just on the Sseven. But they will know, many millionss of them will know."

So. Was it worth it? For the money? For the weird kind of fame?

Oh, and there was this to think about too, he added, a certain price to pay, some small structural changes in my form that were necessary—shortened arms and legs, a more bulbous body, a neckless shape in which the head emerged solidly from the shoulders. It was, he explained, much easier to change me to fit the machines than the other way around. He hoped I wouldn't mind.

An almost-S'hudonni is how he phrased it. I would be a half-man, half-S'hudonni who could ride the emotional waves of the Earthies and send their reflections off to the denizens of those Seven Worlds.

There might be some small pain for a while during the recovery from surgery, he said. The S'hudonni medcots were unused to dealing with Earthies. And then, he said, the Seven Worlds would be mine. I had a day to think it over, and then we would start.

And I did think it over a bit, comparing my current life to the one

he promised. Thinking of the past. Thinking of his offered future. I'd lose something, sure, but it was gone already, in a lot of ways. The athlete I had been wasn't there anymore, that fame hadn't lasted past the final touchdown pass. This offered me a way back to where I had been.

That night I made love for hours to the sexy little hostess. I was most inventive, thinking about how it was the last time I would ever make love for real. The next day I was in orbit and the changes began.

Two months later, the new me waddled from the therapy pool and onto the connecting cot for our first trial run, a young man on his wedding night, complete with tropical honeymoon breezes and a beautiful bride. The S'hudonni techies implanted his receiver without his ever knowing. The thing is the size of an ant and has about the same touch when it lands. By the time he slapped the back of his neck it was imbedded and burrowing deeper. In an hour it was ready, and so was I. We began.

My body, that body that once threw touchdown passes and made love all night, now lay there, bulbous, pale and blubbery while my mind went zooming into others, borrowing their emotions, stealing their lives from them, in a way, to entertain the Seven.

That first guy was surprisingly clumsy, I thought. He lacked the little touches, the subtle nothings that bring a woman alive, make the whole thing worthwhile. He was all right, I suppose, as far as he went, but I was not surprised, later, to find out that Twoclicks was not terribly impressed.

It went that way again the second time, and the third, and Twoclicks was disappointed. We were not the empire's sensation, as he would have liked. Mild success was not what he sought, though he made his profit from me.

As for me, it had quickly become clear that this life was no happier than my previous one, no more fulfilling. I was a kind of powerless vampire, a slave to Twoclicks' profits.

So I began to experiment here and there, tested the parameters of my skills, of my strength, in each body I visited, seeking something, a little control, a little power.

With the rutting lover in London, struggling to unravel the buttons and clasps of his best friend's wife, I realized for the first time that I could, with concentration, affect emotions. I cooled his ardor, and his erection, for a time. Her reaction to that, and her warm mouth, defeated my efforts, but I had learned something.

With the woman vacationing in the Caribbean, I realized a little more, helped her reach a peak she'd never climbed before, shuddering with the unexpected pleasure of it.

There was a setback with the athlete, the famous baseball pitcher. He almost seemed to sense me somehow and forced me away, out of his mind, just when I began to bring on an early ejaculation. His pride was at stake, and his strength too much for me. I fled, much to Twoclicks' displeasure. If I couldn't do better than that, there would be no grand successes, no enormous fame.

On the next insertion things were a bit better. The tired, worn-out old television journalist suddenly found new strength to bring his mistress to orgasm. I was very proud of that, and Twoclicks was pleased. Our ratings on the Seven climbed a bit.

AND NOW, HERE, THERE IS SUSAN.

It is a vicious move on the part of Twoclicks. Susan, my first wife, my first love, maybe my only love, really—and the one I hurt so much.

Here, in this twelfth-floor beachfront condo where I can see the Gulf of Mexico breakers rolling in toward the beach below, where I can still smell the sex in the air from two long hours of lovemaking, where I can still taste the skin and the sweat of her boyfriend in my mouth—here, I am part of the one woman who meant something to me. This is a kind of cosmic practical joke on Twoclicks' part. He must find it humorous for me to be inside her while she is with another.

Susan is my body. I am Susan; I am in her emotions, her thoughts,

her physical sensations. I know them all, I filter them, I send them along for those strange creatures on all of the Seven to wonder over, talk about, be interested in and, in some cases, I suppose, masturbate to.

I am supposed to take what she gives me, work with it, massage it, heighten the best and dampen the worst—enhance, suppress, tweak those responses here and there, glide along the synapses to ride the emotional waves—and then send it all along so those things on the Seven can know what the Earthies are *really* like, the famous primitive Earthies with those delightful chemicals coursing through them. The manic depressives of the mercantile empire. Such fun they are.

I am there as Susan stands nude at the mirror. Behind her the boyfriend, Tilden, sleeps on the wide bed, his soft snore every now and then hardening into a primal grunt before his breathing again eases.

She reaches up to support her breasts with the palms of her hands, looks them over. There is hard-earned perfection here. Susan has tugged eternally on a Torquemadish device with plastic handles and tightly wound springs to help these breasts stay high and firm.

And her thighs and hips. They represent hours of sweat, as well. And her waist, it is the product of one hundred situps a day.

She smiles at herself in the mirror. The face is a gift, the high cheekbones and perfect nose inherited from her mother, Miss Florida Citrus, 1965. Mother, in her mid-fifties, is still beautiful.

And Susan's doctorate in history is a kind of gift, as well, one coupled with the effort to use it. Her father is a full professor of English, University of Florida. Her mother, the brainy beauty queen, is a dentist and a good one. There is no shortage of brains in the family, no shortage of academic expectations.

And no shortage of perfect teeth. Susan tugs at her upper lip to check them. She brushes and flosses more than she should, probably. That is what one does when one is a dentist's daughter.

Today, oddly, there is a slight twinge in the upper right quadrant. It is probably just her sinuses, but she'll ask Mom about that in a day or two. And behind her right ear there is a small mosquito bite. These are her only flaws.

Susan has striking black hair at mid-length, mussed from love-making now as she appraises herself at the bathroom door. High cheekbones dominate a long, narrow face with dark eyes. She squints—is nearsighted then—to see long lashes, those expensive teeth, a well-made nose.

She is tall for a woman, just shy of five-foot-nine. She is not unhappy about the height, though it and her intelligence kept most boys at bay while she was growing up. In high school the jocks were too dumb and the brainy ones too short. For the first three years of college it was the same. Then, in her senior year, there was Robert, the star quarterback, tall, handsome, soon-to-be rich, who wooed her and won, for a while.

(So, I think, I am still in her thoughts, from time to time at any rate.)

Now, she thinks, it is twelve years and two marriages later. She is well into her teaching career, the hunt for tenure is over, the publishing goes well, her evaluations are high, and her two disastrous relationships are behind her. She ought to be happy, she thinks, or at least satisfied. But there is no man around anywhere, none available, it seems, for her. Except, of course, for Tilden.

Tilden is, in many ways, a perfectly nice person, if a little too quiet, too acquiescent, not strong enough. She supposes she ought to allow herself to love him. He's not bad looking at all for a man nearly fifty years old. He's pleasant to talk to. He's caring and gentle, seems to genuinely want her to be happy.

And the sex is good. Startling in its intensity, really, and worthy of note for Tilden's surprising inventiveness. You would never guess it to look at him, glasses, receding hairline, that slight paunch.

But for the first time in her life Susan has found a man who actually seems to want her to have an orgasm, a real one, not the little fakery she's always had to practice. It has been a great joy to discover that she can do this, can rise to that peak, lose control over the enjoyment of it, ride the crest for a minute or two. In her eight long years of marriage to Robert and that one miserable year with Paul, it happened so rarely as to be worthy of special celebration.

That was not the reason the relationships broke up, of course. With

Robert, it was his insufferable ego and inability to remain faithful that finally drove her to find warmth somewhere else. She'd been too young, attracted by his power and glamour and too late to realize its pain. It took years for her to discover that he was a kind of emotional monster, devouring her piece by piece as the years went by. At first it was just his attitude, and she learned to live with it. Then, over time, as his career began to falter, his abuse became more physical, even, toward the end, frightening. Finally, she fled.

(I send this along, share my shame and anger. So, this is how she sees what we had, only the worst of me is remembered.)

LATER, TEACHING, SHE MET PAUL, WHO WAS AT FIRST ALL GRASSHOPPER KISSES AND DREAMS, A PAINTER AND SCULPTOR AND ACTOR AND, WELL, IT SEEMED HEAVENLY UNTIL

she finally realized that, like Robert, really, all Paul cared about was Paul. Like Robert, he wanted to control everything, and everything had to go his way. Then, worse, much worse than Robert, he began to threaten, to push, to strike out at her.

She left. That had been a nasty scene. He truly couldn't believe she was leaving, had to turn it around in his own mind so that he was the one leaving her, that it was all her fault that he'd become what he'd become. She had laughed at him for that as she slammed the door behind herself.

Now, turning to look at Tilden sleeping there, she still can't figure out what had attracted her to either of her former lovers in the first place. Their physical attractiveness, she supposes, and then sighs. That, at least, isn't the problem with Tilden.

She got a call from Paul yesterday. For most of the past year, since the breakup, he's been living with a grad student, a skinny little thing with unlikely large breasts and long, brown hair down to her rear. Susan often wonders if she—Michelle is her name—is able to reach orgasm with Paul. She'd have to be quick about it.

He called Susan just to see how she was doing, he said, just to "make sure you're feeling all right about yourself. It wasn't your fault, Susan, not totally. We were both at fault. I should have worked harder at making it work for us."

Sure. Susan suspected he was having trouble with the grad student and was out scouting around.

Well, she wouldn't be scouted, wouldn't fall for that again. Susan, after all, is no kid anymore. She's in her thirties now, an assistant chair of a respected history department at the state's top university. She is beautiful, intelligent, and well-traveled.

And she's making love to a podiatrist. That's what Tilden does. He fixes feet. She sighs. Turns to walk back to the bed. Sits down beside Tilden and looks at him there, on his belly, pale butt half covered by her sheets.

He moans, rolls over, opens his eyes. "Hi, beautiful," he says, sleepily. "What time is it?"

"One-fifteen," she says. "And I have to get back to my office." She leans over and kisses him, quickly. He throws his legs over the side, stands.

"Yeah. Back to the salt mine," he says. "I've got some fallen arches to look at, and a broken toe, and one really interesting stress fracture..."

"Tilden," she says, and looks at him, shaking her head.

He smiles, takes it in good humor. "I know, I know," he says. "Still, it is interesting, a basketball player..."

She shuts him up with a kiss, and they both start getting dressed. He's so sweet, she thinks. But a podiatrist?

I TRY TO LEAVE, BUT TWOCLOCKS INSISTS I STAY. PATIENCE, HE TELLS ME through the subvocal feed that penetrates the technological cocoon. Patience.

I AM THERE AN HOUR LATER AS SUSAN LOOKS OUT THE SLIDING GLASS

doors of the apartment, down twelve floors to the beach below, where sand dunes sprout with sea oats and grapes and the summer heat has kept the crowds away.

She hasn't left for work, that was just an excuse to be alone for awhile. Now I am there as she watches a small boy and his father net the shallow waters of the shore for small fish and crabs. She can hear their laughter as they toss the net and pull it in. There are small brief flashes of silver from the trapped minnows. A good haul.

The scene is achingly tranquil, normal. Susan finds herself crying as she watches it. This is good emotion, nothing too strong yet, but pathos sells, so I capture it. She misses that normality. She badly wants a family, a small boy of her own.

Offshore a mile or more, a squall line marches toward her. From its bottom a water spout swirls, narrow and spinning, angling down until it touches the placid, warm Gulf. As she watches, another forms and it, too, spins its own way down toward the water.

The two spouts dance a minuet, moving farther apart and then coming closer together. Finally, in a scene she hasn't seen before, the two join, become one large swirling dark mass that carries in its rising column of water its own cooling destruction. Within seconds of forming it breaks apart, shattering into a broken rain that falls onto the water.

I save this too, though it is obscure in its metaphor and perhaps too esoteric for all but the audience on Downtone. There, Twoclocks tells me, the metaphors sell better than the storyline.

Susan hears a knock, then an impatient doorbell. She turns away from the window and walks to the door, opens it, and there is Paul, her ex-husband, the bastard, the son of a bitch, the asshole. Himself. Standing there, with *that* look on his face. He is quite drunk.

This is good, very good material. I capture it all.

She almost slams the door in his face, but no, she's far too nice for that. She stands there, says nothing.

"Susan," he says. "Susan, I, well, I..." and words fail him. He stumbles around for a way to express himself. Tries again, managing this: "Susan, I've come. I've just come to say, well, that I'd like to...well."

I realize she is enjoying this. She revels in his groveling. Something has gone wrong with his long-haired little whippet and he has come scurrying back, hopelessly drunk, tail between his legs. She hopes he is quite miserable. Let the hangover, she thinks, be monumental.

He takes a deep breath. "I've learned a lot these past few months, Susan. About myself. About us. About what went wrong between us."

So, she thinks, the girlfriend must have left him. Good for her. Tired, no doubt, of always having to fake her orgasm.

It all sounds very memorized, practiced, as he forges on, his words slurred by alcohol: "...and I'd like to have a chance to talk with you. About giving it another try, perhaps. About, at least, *talking* about giving it another try."

And he puts that earnest look on his face now, the one that once won her heart. So honest. So caring.

I can't believe she'll fall for this, but she does. She warms. She invites him in for a cup of coffee.

The relief on his face borders on hilarious. He walks through the doorway and into the small living room. Sits on the front edge of the couch as she walks over to the kitchen nook and pours him a cup, walks back, hands it to him.

"Thanks," he says. "Thank you. Very much. For the coffee."

She smiles, sits on the chair across the small coffee table from him. Says, "Paul, I'll help you sober up, and we can talk. But I want to be very honest with you. I'm not interested in our trying it again. Not now. Not after what I've gone through."

And, she adds to herself, not now that I know how much fun it can be having sex with someone who knows what he is doing, and cares to do it well.

He looks crestfallen, his pouty chin reminding her of the way the children look in the daycare center where she spends her Thursday mornings as a volunteer. A two-year-old can wear that look, that open frown, the chin down into the chest. It doesn't wear well on Paul. What a baby he is.

He rises from the couch. Walks over to her.

"Look, Susan, I really think we should give it a try. At least just go

out to dinner. Bern's maybe? Someplace really nice."

He reaches out to her for a hug, and something about the pouty baby face, the whining tone, lets her give in, submit to the hug.

Which starts out chaste and friendly, a bear hug, really. Human warmth and all that.

And then he looks at her, and she turns to see his face, and he clumsily, forcefully, forces his mouth onto hers in a demanding kiss.

She tries to shove him away, but her arms are wrapped tight, and he is strong, a bear of a man.

She squirms, tries to break his armlock on her but can't, and for the first time a tiny hint of worry creeps in. Paul? Violent? Would he?

"Oh, Susan," he says, and reaches up with his right hand to take her hair and pull it from the back, forcing her to face him again. "Oh, Susan. I know you still love me. I know you do."

He leans down to kiss her again, and she brings her knee up against his crotch, gently though, not trying to hurt him, not wanting to hurt this person, who, after all, she once was married to.

He doesn't get the hint, just reaches down with that right hand to shove her knee back down, and then resumes the hug, still mumbling drunken ramblings about love, about Susan, and how they really were meant to be.

She means to bring the knee back up again, gently, to push him away. But this time I intervene, a moment of concentration and the knee rises hard, more quickly, trying to hurt, to break away.

"Ow!" he yells. It has finally dawned on him through his drunkenness that she wants to break the embrace. He lets go, arms out, palms up, surrendering.

"Damn, Susan. What'd you do that for?"

Susan doesn't say anything. Just stands there and looks at him. She wonders exactly how that happened. Did she mean to be so rough?

"Oh, God, Susan. I'd never hurt you. Damn! I can't believe you'd think something like that!" And he pounds his fist into the palm of his hand in anger at the thought that his passion might get the better of him.

"You should leave now, Paul."

She says that very calmly, adds "Please. Now."

For a moment, he almost meekly leaves. Seems to lean that way for that fraction of a second.

Then, instead, he shakes his head.

"No, Susan. I'm not leaving until we talk about all this."

"Now, Paul."

"Susan, please. Just listen to me for a second," he says, and reaches out with his right hand to touch her, stroke her cheek.

She plans on raising her hand to block his from touching her face, but, instead, I add strength to that effort, force to the blow.

The hand raise becomes a slap. A strong one, across his left cheek.

There is a flash of anger. He grabs her wrist with his left hand. Holds it there firmly. Shakes his head slightly, as if to clear it of what's gone wrong.

"Susan, I can't believe you'd do something like this. After all we had? After all we were?"

Susan is puzzled, wonders again at her own actions. She never meant to strike him, but there is a red bruise on his cheekbone as proof of what she did.

"Paul, I..." is all she manages to say before he grabs her other wrist, forces her arms down to her side, and leans forward to kiss her.

There is a meanness to the kiss, an anger, a power. Susan feels helpless. She has never been in this situation, never been helpless.

But I have. Helplessness, powerlessness mean something to me. I know what to do.

I concentrate, focus.

Her knee comes up, hard, into his crotch, and he drops the wrists and yelps in pain. "Jesus!" is all he can manage to say.

I can feel my power growing. She is angry, and frightened, adrenaline pumping, flushed with new strength.

I have her hit him, hard, fist closed, on the side of the head. He is leaned over, clutching his crotch as she does this, and the force of the blow topples him. He hits the ground with a thud, crockery rattling on the dining room table. He moans, but starts to rise slowly, getting up on one knee.

The anger, the hostility, is immense in Susan. I ride that wave and steer it, controlling it, urging the energy here and there. She looks around the room, sees the table lamp, a heavy, Greco-styled ceramic piece. She lifts it with both hands, brings it down hard on his head, and he falls flat on the floor, still moaning.

The lamp is not broken, heavy thing, and she lifts it again to crash it down on him. She can kill him here, now, and be done with it. All the fear, all the hate, can be cleansed.

I help her raise the lamp above her head, using strength she didn't know she had, and we are about to start the killing blow when I feel a change, a hesitation.

Susan wonders how this is happening, and why? When did she become a murderer, when did she become vicious?

Never. Not ever. And there is, she thinks, no need for this now. He is helpless, barely conscious on the floor.

I am losing her, losing control. She is about to back out of this final act and become again the weak woman who can't find a man.

I force her to raise the lamp again. She struggles against me, torn between the power that is offered, the ultimate power of death over life, and her own weakness, her unwillingness to kill.

And, I realize as she wins the struggle, her own unwillingness to be under any control. Paul. Or me.

She will not fall to this passion, will not let me rule her, and boots me unceremoniously out, sending that part of me that is within back into the miserable void of falling forever nothingness, of pain and expanding self.

In my final moment of awareness, I can see Susan standing over Paul, the lamp in her hand. She is triumphant, over him, over me. Over herself.

**I AWAKE ON MY CONTROL COUCH IN ORBIT.
Twoclicks, the slimy bastard, stands
over me, sipping on a soft drink.**

Oh, Christ, I have failed. I wanted that
death. I enjoyed that moment, that knowledge of the power I held. This admission is awful, knowing I sought that man's death. I am doubly at fault, for wanting to kill him and then for failing to do it. I marvel at my own ability for evil.

And now there is nothing. Even a woman, Susan, could usher me out, find her own control and dismiss me back to the void. She will probably keep dating the aptly named Tilden, I think, a man who seems quite willing to be controlled, happy with it, even.

My powers are nothing, I realize. The future is a black hole of mediocrity, trapped in a form that isn't mine, living only through the joys and pains of others. But, I think, I might well have killed Paul had things gone the way I wanted. Perhaps it is for the best. My very weakness saved him, saved me.

Twoclicks smiles.

"Wass very, very good," he says. "Such passsion. Such emotion. Iss the best you have done."

Oh, Christ. I cannot speak to him.

"The tension, the power, the art, yes?" he says.

I nod.

"I think this will make us very happy, you and I. Perhaps now, soon, we will be mosst famous," he says, and Twoclicks has never spoken like that before.

I whistle and click back to him. Thank him.

"You rest," he says, and smiles that vicious smile. "And tomorrow, we try another. Thiss new technique, this violence and passion? When you master it, when you can control it fully, we will profit from it, you and I. Great profit."

I really have no choice. I have made my decision, and Twoclicks knows it.

He gives that cheery smile, clicks and whistles a little more praise, even offers me a soft drink. And I, thinking of Susan, thinking of my future, close my eyes and rest. □

The son of the chief and the son of a commoner were bound by love and loyalty.
Then one became a god.

YOUNG MAN WHO BECAME WEARY

BY JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON

Illustration by Ken Graning

THERE WAS A SON OF THE CHIEF OF A VILLAGE SITUATED ON A SMALL peninsula in Willapa Bay. This young man's name was Yakhan, "His Son." His best friend was Yakiyal, "Commoner." They did everything together and loved each other very much. Yakhan never acted more important than Yakiyal, but he took advantage of his birth to lord it over others.

Together they set out in the morning to visit a nearby village. They met Ahatau, "A Maiden," the daughter of her people's chief. Because Yakiyal was extremely beautiful, the chief's daughter liked him at once. She did not care that he was a commoner. Yakhan noticed a slave girl, whom he immediately found wonderfully attractive, with a fascinating combination of shyness and boldness.

The two young men went often to the other village. It became known that a chief's daughter loved a commoner. Ahatau took some teasing from her sisters and cousins, but secretly everyone approved of her choice, for Yakiyal was the comeliest man imaginable. His father had no claim to high birth, but he was wealthy in his own right, and there was every expectation that Ahatau's father would receive a big marriage price.

Not so for Yakhan and Agaylaitish. When it became known that Yakhan was enamored of a slave girl, his father

was mortified and became abusive. Every morning before his son set out, the chief berated Yakhan in no uncertain terms. Then Yakhan said, "Will you at least meet with Agaylaitish, father? You don't know what she was before she became a slave." At this, his mother joined in and scolded him for speaking to his father in such a disobedient manner.

The chief of the other village would not set Agaylaitish free for fear of offending Yakhan's father, who was mighty. Finally, Yakhan was unable to see Agaylaitish at all, for she had been sent away, and no one would tell him where.

He asked everyone. They said, "She went away." He had no clue. Then one day, Yakhan and Yakiyal went to a wild marsh north along the bay, near the Willapa River, to be away from people. Yakhan said, "I am weary, Yakiyal, weary."

Yakiyal replied, "Since you cannot have your choice of bride, neither will I ever marry."



"You made him weary, so now I am weary, and I begin to understand him. He has changed his nature and does not live on the land."

"No, no, you must marry Princess Ahatau. You are fortunate and must not turn your back on fortune. As for me, I will go away."

"If you go, I will be unhappy," said Yakiyal, "for I love you greatly."

"No, no, I am weary."

In the afternoon Yakhan came home and lay down in his father's lodge. He ate nothing. He rose early and went with his friend into the woods by the marshland. They selected the high dead limb of a lightning-blasted tree and used it for their arrows' target. Yakiyal made a perfect hit. So did Yakhan. Yakiyal whooped in praise for himself and his friend, but Yakhan was unresponsive. He said, "Oh my heart is weary, weary. If you love me, you will see me always, but I must go."

"No, Yakhan, no! Don't leave me, for I would be unhappy."

THAT EVENING, YAKHAN AGAIN LAY DOWN IN THE lodge without eating. So it progressed for five days. He shot targets with his friend, he moaned about his sorrows, and he went home and slept without eating. After the five days, he and Yakiyal took off all their clothing and went swimming in the bay. Yakhan dived under the water five times. Each time he resurfaced, his friend became increasingly fearful that Yakhan would not come back to land, but was purposely drowning himself.

The fifth time Yakhan came up, he was a long way from shore, far out in the shallow bay, and lay upon a snag. Yakiyal perceived that his friend was changed in some spiritual manner and might choose to stay in the sea forever.

Yakiyal cried and cried. He sat on the shore crying. Yakhan looked at him from the snag and said, "Why cry for me, Yakiyal? This is the way we shall do it. If you love me, you will always see me. Come to this place and we shall shoot targets. Tell no one! But if you cease to love me, then you may tell where I am. Come to me tomorrow and we will enjoy the day." Then the chief's son dove into the sea and was gone.

Yakiyal cried on his way home. He told no one what had happened to Yakhan. The next day he went to the shore nearest the snag and Yakhan came out of the water. They shot targets; it was like always. "You told no one?" asked Yakhan. "No one," said Yakiyal.

That evening someone asked him, "Where is Yakhan?"

He said, "I have not seen him in a while." The chief sent the villagers into the surrounding woods to look for his son.

The chief said, "Someone must have killed my son." The search extended to neighboring villages. There was no sign of him. Every morning, Yakiyal went out alone to wander along Willapa Bay toward the marsh. He would stand near the shore until his friend came out.

Yakhan would say, "Never tell them; if you do, you will see me no more."

People began to wonder about Yakiyal's behavior. The chief said, "That commoner has killed my son and hidden his body. Why else is he so secretive?"

Five mornings Yakiyal went out to the marsh alone, eating nothing this whole while. One day the chief's slaves followed him and saw Yakhan and Yakiyal shooting targets. Yakhan's father's slaves reported, "Your son is well. We saw him shooting targets with Yakiyal."

When Yakiyal came back into the village that evening, he was dragged before the chief, who said, "Why have you been keeping his whereabouts a secret?" But Yakiyal said nothing. He made no excuse. The chief let him go, but the next morning, the slaves again followed him without making a sound.

"There are people watching us secretly," said Yakhan. "I fear you have told them."

"I didn't. Your father asked and asked. I said nothing."

"Tell my father, 'When I was with you, you were ashamed of me, for I would not distinguish blood from blood. Why complain if I am gone? Let me be, you who are ashamed.'"

In the evening, Yakiyal went home and Yakhan went into the water. Yakiyal took the message to the chief, who gripped a spear's haft until his knuckles were white, but restrained himself from striking the messenger. He commanded, "Tell me at least why you will not reveal his whereabouts?"

"You scolded him every day because of his love for the slave Agay-laitish. You shamed him and it hurt his heart. You made him weary, so now I am weary, and I begin to understand him. He has changed his nature and does not live on the land. You can see him never again."

Yakhan's father felt guilt and sorrow, but more than that, his pride was injured. Several of the relatives mourned. They said to the chief, "Buy him the slave of that chief's daughter."

He replied, "I don't know where she went. Yet if I can find her, I will buy her for my son, at any cost."

The next morning, Yakiyal set out and stood by the sea. Yakhan appeared on the snag, then swam ashore. Yakiyal said, "They are willing to buy Agaylaitish for you. You cannot marry her, but she will be your slave. You don't need to treat her any differently than you would a wife."

Yakhan said, "Tell them, 'Keep still! You are still ashamed of me.'"

In the evening, Yakiyal was taken before the chief, who demanded, "What did he say?"

"Be still, you are still ashamed."

Unbeknownst to Yakiyal, when he left the next morning for the marsh, all the youths in the village met with the chief. They received his orders and made themselves ready for a hunt.

In the woods by the marsh, Yakhan said to Yakiyal, "We are surrounded. Run, or they will kill you." The two friends separated and young hunters surrounded Yakhan. They tried to close in on him, but he pushed right through them. He had become exceedingly strong. They saw him dive into the bay. He emerged and lay on the snag.

The hunters went back to the village in tears of defeat. Then the seasoned warriors came forth. The chief said, "As he has become a monster, we will treat him like a monster! Let us kill my son!"

Yakiyal visited the shore in the place where the chief's son usually appeared. He waited and waited, but Yakhan did not come forth. Yakiyal began to cry, certain he had seen his friend for the last time. Then he looked up, and Yakhan was standing there. Yakiyal said, "Oh my friend! I was so unhappy! I thought you had left me forever."

"I shall tell you when they have made me weary. Until then, you need not cry. Tell them, 'Leave me alone.' If they do so, then you and I may continue as before." Then Yakhan looked quickly about and said, "Well! Here they come!"

There were fishermen coming in three lines of canoes, each with a long net in the water. They had tied large stones to the nets so that they hung down. They surrounded Yakhan's route of escape. Then warriors came forth from the woods with their arrows ready. They shot Yakhan full of arrows. He leapt into the bay and disappeared. The nets did not shake. All the arrows came to the surface and floated.

That evening, Yakiyal said to the chief and to the warriors and to the young hunters and the slaves, "Can you not leave Yakhan be? If

Continued on page 93

On the terminal beach, the clones faced each other down, knowing full well that there could be only one survivor.

STOLEN FACES, STOLEN NAMES

BY RAY ALDRIDGE

Illustrations by Janet Aulisio Dannheiser

NOMUN WOKE JUST BEFORE SUNDOWN ON A BEACH OF SHATTERED DIAMONDS, the glitter cold against his back. He rolled to his knees and found himself in a crowd. They all wore Nomun's face.

Seven Nomuns stared, hot-eyed.

One Nomun lay at the edge of the water, a smear of blood at his mouth. His dead eyes gazed up at the sky.

The last Nomun reached out a hand to help Nomun to his feet.

Nomun took the hand and stood, though the world still wavered. He concentrated on the helpful one and saw his own face as it might have looked a thousand years before. Ten thousand years? "Thank you," Nomun said.

A smile lit Young Nomun's dark features. "Yes. And you are?" "Nomun," Nomun said, and as he spoke, he realized he remembered nothing but his name and his face. For some reason he felt no great surprise; it was almost as if he had made the same discovery many times before.

"Of course," Young Nomun said, his smile growing wider. The others made a collective sound of disgust, a sort of growling hiss, full of contempt. Nomun jerked and released Young Nomun's hand.

A Nomun with white hair sniggered. Like several of the others, he wore a unsuit of vaguely military cut, the fabric showing dark frayed patches where weapon pouches had been ripped away. A terrible scar crossed the high forehead at an angle, then cut downward through the left eye socket and furrowed the cheek. The eye had been replaced by a mech prosthesis, a blind metallic gleam in the damaged flesh.

Scar Nomun flexed his hands and moved close. "We really should have killed the clone before he woke. It would still be easy," said Scar Nomun.

Young Nomun stepped between them. "No. You'll kill no more of us."

Scar Nomun laughed. "You were foolish to stop me, clone. It would have been just the two of us, then. You're young and strong. Who knows, in the end you might have stolen my name."

Nomun looked at Scar Nomun's hands. The palms were thick and calloused, the fingers long and muscular; those hands must have crushed the throat of the dead one. Nomun glanced down at his own hands and shuddered.

To distract himself, he studied the others. Their faces were so similar that they seemed to disappear, leaving visible only the harsh emotions each bore: hatred, fury, fear. Nomun put his hands to his own face. The skin was dry and deeply furrowed. *Am I old?* he wondered.

A Nomun in black silk and silver lace stepped forward. A jade disk in one ear lobe matched the cloudy green of his eyes. "Putting aside the question of our identities, perhaps we should consider other questions," said Jade Nomun. "Where are we? Who has brought us here? For what purpose?"

A gaunt Nomun with a chempump laced to his neck spoke. "Do you care?" Pump Nomun asked, his fingers fluttering at the worn keyboard of the pump. His face abruptly cleared,

becoming almost as peaceful as the dead one's. He gazed off across the sunset sea. "Look...great beauty."

"Beauty?" asked a Nomun whose features seemed blurred by centuries of self-indulgence. "Only a rothead would see beauty here," said Soft Nomun. "It's cold, I'll be hungry soon, there's no place to sit down. The light is almost gone." Soft Nomun turned fearful eyes on the crystal jungle behind them.

NOMUN NOTICED THE JUNGLE FOR THE FIRST time. Fifty meters inland, angular shapes rose black against the darkening sky; slow pulses of blue light flickered beneath the canopy. A shock of recognition flew through him—but no word, no image followed. "What is it?" he asked Young Nomun.

"It's a memwort. We're on the terminal moraine of a memwort. So says that one," Young Nomun indicated a Nomun whose naked torso gleamed like blued metal. Nomun looked again and saw that Blue Nomun's torso *was* metal, cunningly articulated at the waist. His arms were forged to resemble human arms, but armored hydraulic lines veined them.

The cyborg spoke in a high clear voice. "Yes, a memwort: a plantlike macro-organism. A memory storage biodevice, adapted from a natural species." He sniffed. "A costly, inefficient mechanism; the same quantity of memory could be better maintained on a monomol chip the size of my thumbnail. Conspicuous consumption of the most blatant sort. The fantasy of a disordered, melodramatic mind, one unconcerned with safety or efficiency. Look!" He gestured at the glittering beach. "We stand on broken memories."

"Whose memories?" The Nomun who spoke was beautiful, his face subtly reshaped by some great lineamentor. The wideset eyes, the hawk nose, the sharp cheeks, the long jaw, the thin-lipped slash of a mouth, the black hair swept back from the forehead; each feature was distilled from its original harshness into clean perfection. Handsome Nomun's voice was a rich tenor. "Whose memories? I have many enemies."

Blue Nomun turned a severe eye on Handsome Nomun. "How would I know? My datacache is extensive, but not omniscient. Be amazed by what I do know."

"And what do you know, clone?"

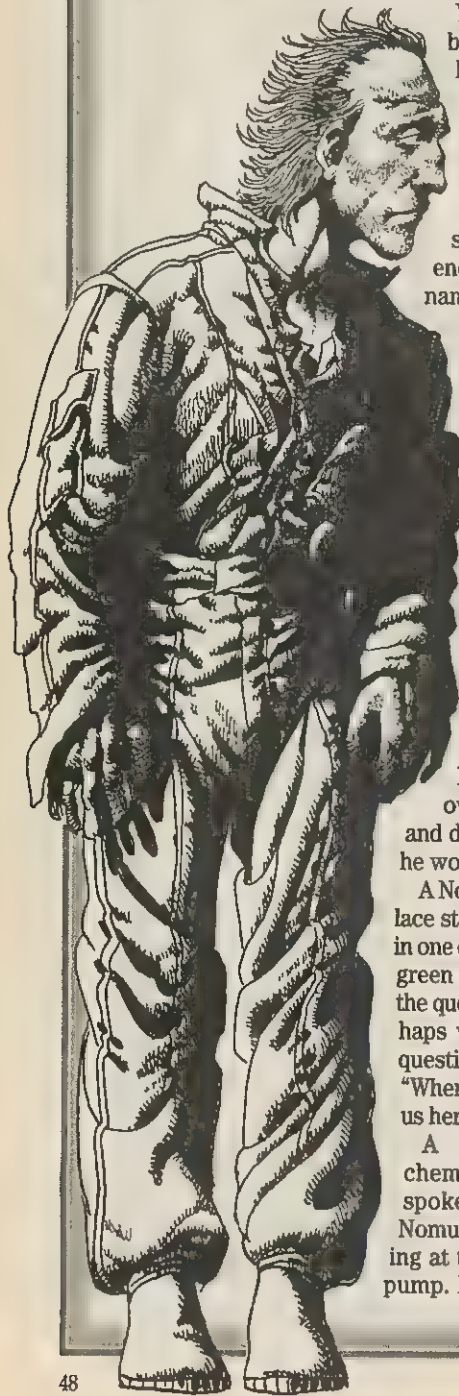
"I know, first, that I am not a clone!" Blue Nomun took a step toward Handsome Nomun, servos whirring, powerful hands grinding into fists.

"Yes, yes," interrupted the last Nomun, in a voice that shook with fear. This Nomun carried no distinguishing mark; he wore no jewelry, his clothes were nondescript, his hair was cut in no particular style. "This is all very interesting. But even I know at least one thing: someone intends to punish us! Why? Because someone knows we're impostors."

Of all of us, Nomun thought, False Nomun is the only one who does not believe himself to be the Nomun.

"Whoever brought us here intends our destruction; nothing could be more obvious," said False Nomun.

NOMUN TURNED AWAY FROM THE JUNGLE AND LOOKED OUT OVER the sea. Its surface was like polished iron; not a ripple disturbed the reflection of the great red sun that touched the horizon. A kilometer to the east he saw an island; after a moment he decided it must be another memwort. Its terminal beach trailed away to the north. It grew south like a chain of bright beads,



each node taller and more lustrous, until it crested in a glistening cone, around which blue lightning flared, though there were no clouds.

When he looked back at the sun, it was half gone, but now he saw shapes moving slowly against the red disk, growing larger.

"Look," Nomun said. "What are they?"

Blue Nomun turned and stared. "Breathboats," he said. "We are on Coal then. I thought so."

Nomun watched the boats drift closer.

There were three of them. The masts seemed impossibly high and delicate, ten times the length of the craft. The sails were a transparent glimmer against the sunset sky, thousands of square meters of monomol film spread to the imperceptible breeze. Each hull seemed a dark fleck riding at the bottom of a glorious soap bubble. Nomun had seen this loveliness before—of that he was sure. Still, there were no meaningful echoes in this whisper of memory.

The others watched the breathboats with varying degrees of tension.

"Perhaps our captors arrive," said Handsome Nomun.

"Should we take refuge in the jungle?" asked Soft Nomun.

"Who knows what they plan for us?"

"That would not be advisable," said Blue Nomun in pedantic tones. "The 'jungle' growths are, in fact, the exposed ganglia of the memwort. Should you stumble against the wrong synapse in the dark, you might well be trapped in an irreversible fugue."

Scar Nomun spat, just missing the toe of Nomun's boot. "Coal. A rich man's playworld. Whoever collected us seems less formidable already."

Jade Nomun looked at Scar Nomun without expression, but his eyes glittered. Pump Nomun released a soft musical sigh, and his fingers tapped idly at the keyboard of his chempump. False Nomun clenched his jaw and made no sound, but sweat filmed his face, despite the coolness of the air. Young Nomun waited with a small smile on his lips.

NO ONE SPOKE AGAIN UNTIL THE SUN WAS gone and the breathboats had drawn close. The nearest coasted to a stop just fifty meters off the beach. Soft light bathed its decks and lit the sails, transforming them into a cloud of glowing mist against the darkening sky. A pale-haired handsome woman seemed to be the captain; she stood in a pulpit on the foredeck, directing with silent gestures dozens of spidery mechs. When the mechs had feathered the sails to her satisfaction, an anchor splashed ripples into the flawless surface of the sea. The other boats anchored nearby.

Men and women clustered in small groups along the near rail. They wore fashionably eccentric garments and privacy masks. Their languid postures spoke of pleasant expectation. Nomun felt a chill. What did they wait for?

False Nomun's teeth began to chatter. Suddenly he ran forward into the sea, kicking up a spray in the shallows. "I'm sorry, I meant no harm," he cried, just before he smashed into an invisible barrier. A spot of violent yellow light flared at the contact point, a tone almost too low to be heard throbbed out, and False Nomun was flung on his back. He floated motionless.

"Ah...," Young Nomun said, and made a disgusted face before trotting into the water. Nomun hesitated a moment, then followed. Together they dragged False Nomun onto the beach,

where he coughed and gagged and started to breathe again.

"Idiots," said Scar Nomun.

"Indeed," said Jade Nomun. "But at least we know we're not meant to leave the island."

"The memwort," corrected Blue Nomun.

"Yes, of course, the memwort," said Jade Nomun. "Now. What part do *they* play?" He gestured at the passengers.

"Tell us," said Scar Nomun. "They look to be your sort."

For an instant Jade Nomun's carefully casual face slipped, and Nomun saw another face underneath, bloody and inhuman, older and more loathsome than Scar Nomun's simple brutality. But Jade Nomun recovered his smile and said, "Yes, they are, aren't they?"

"I will speak to them," said Handsome Nomun. He approached the edge of the water and called out in his rich voice. "Aboard the vessel. Who are you?"

There was no response, though some of the passengers nudged each other.

"We're castaways," said Handsome Nomun, strain marring his rounded tones. "Can you take us off?"

Laughter floated across the dark water, and Handsome Nomun clenched his fists.

"They don't care," said Soft Nomun, in a small voice. "They must be the ones who brought us here."

No, Nomun thought. *That isn't true. They're only watchers.* He wondered how he could know this, when he knew so very little.

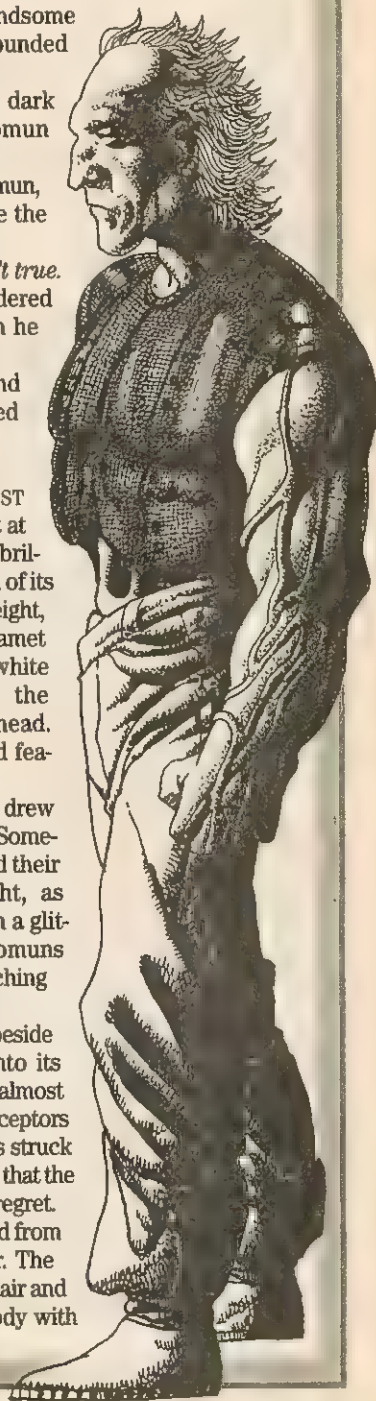
The black water swirled and broke, as Dead Nomun emerged from the sea.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE NEAREST breathboat pointed her spotlight at the killmech, and in that white brilliance they could see every detail of its chassis. It was twice Nomun's height, armored with some dull red ceramet alloy, painted with stylized white bones. The braincase bore the detailed image of a rotting head. Nomun recognized the decayed features as his own.

As it came up the beach they drew back to the edge of the jungle. Someone on one of the boats followed their retreat with another spotlight, as though they were all players on a glittering stage. Several of the Nomuns slapped at their hips, as if reaching for missing weapons.

Dead Nomun knelt smoothly beside the corpse, rolled the body onto its back—a movement that seemed almost gentle. It turned its black photoreceptors on the Nomuns, and Nomun was struck by a sudden irrational perception: that the killmech felt a cold mechanical regret.

A shining vibroscalpel emerged from the tip of its right index finger. The killmech took the corpse by its hair and separated the head from the body with



one precise slash. It removed a thick transparent bag from a storage niche in its thigh, and dropped the head into the bag. As it stood, it attached the bag to a clamp on its chestplate. The head lolled there, an upside-down trophy.

Nomun noticed that Dead Nomun's chest was fitted with ten clamps.

Dead Nomun took a step toward them, then another.

The Nomuns recoiled, backs against the crumbling crystal forms that marked the boundary between the dead beach and the living body of the memwort. As if some group instinct had seized them, half of the Nomuns sidled to the left, half to the right. The killmech accelerated toward the closer, left-hand group, which gave ground. Those in the right-hand group, in which Nomun found himself, attempted to make an end run past the killmech, but it responded with frightening speed, blurring across the open space to confront them.

"Too fast for an unaugmented human. Cheating," hissed Scar Nomun. His living eye was wide with rage.

"Back," the killmech said, in a thin monotone. It pointed to the jungle.

Nomun retreated immediately into the crystal, not pausing until he was ten meters inside the jungle's boundary. At a tall fractured pylon, he turned and watched as the others decided to follow. One by one, they did, until only False Nomun and Soft Nomun remained on the beach.

False Nomun trembled at the very edge of the jungle, caught between two terrors. Soft Nomun stood his ground, as if he could not make himself believe in the reality of the mech. "No!" Soft Nomun's voice quivered with outrage, not fear. "No," he repeated. "I won't go. This isn't right. You can't force me; I'm *Nomun*."

Dead Nomun approached Soft Nomun, moving with smooth precision. "Then you must die," it said. It extended the vibroscalpel slowly, as if giving Soft Nomun as much time as possible.

Soft Nomun's face was a formless darkness in the glare of the spotlights when he turned to appeal to the others. "Wait," he said. "Don't leave. We'll be lost in the jungle, no one will be able to find..." His speech was interrupted by a small gurgling sound. Nomun crouched back into the blackest shadow, watched as Soft Nomun's head tipped forward and fell from his neck. The killmech caught the head before it could hit the ground. A moment later, Soft Nomun's head, face frozen in horrified surprise, swung from the second clamp on the killmech's chest.

False Nomun stared at the kicking corpse, then made a choking sound and fled into the jungle.

The beach was empty, except for the killmech and the two headless corpses. The lights from the breathboats swept back and forth, and Nomun wondered if the spectators had found the performance entertaining.

He could sense the others in the jungle; he felt connected to them by their hatred and suspicion, though he felt none of that himself. His mind still held nothing but his identity, but that seemed to be growing stronger.

The killmech took a step toward the jungle and stopped. "Listen, all," it said, in an amplified voice that shook the jungle and set the crystal to chiming. "Listen, all. You are required to transit this node before daylight. Food and water will be waiting at the internode beach. This device," the killmech pointed to itself with a huge thumb, "will not molest you unless you attempt to return to the terminal beach, or fail to emerge on the internode before the sun clears the horizon." The killmech paused, and the skull moved slowly from side to side. Nomun had the sudden notion that the killmech could see each of them, and when the dead eyes rested on him, he shuddered.

It spoke again. "All who remain on this node at daylight

will die."

"Why?" The voice came from Nomun's left. Nomun recognized the resonant tones of Handsome Nomun.

The killmech swiveled to face the speaker, but it made no response.

Nomun heard a tiny sound, close behind his hiding place. He whirled, to see Scar Nomun holding a heavy shard of crystal, his good eye glittering in the blue light. Nomun crouched, his body falling effortlessly into a defensive posture. Pleasurable remembrance swept through him. Yes, this was true, this was right. Nomun felt a humorless smile tighten his face, and Scar Nomun backed away warily, giving him back exactly the same smile.

"So, you claim to be dangerous after all, old one," Scar Nomun said.

Nomun said nothing. He watched Scar Nomun alertly until the other turned and disappeared into the jungle. Nomun listened to the fading sound of Scar Nomun's boots, crushing the delicate crystals that frosted the ground.

After a moment Blue Nomun's mechanical voice boomed out. "A conference," he called, from a considerable distance. "A truce. Let us confer. Danger exists. One blundering fool could kill us all." After a pause, Blue Nomun repeated his message, word for word, using the same passionless inflections. Nomun followed the voice through the jungle, stepping carefully around the crystal growths, guided by the faint cold light they emitted.



THE JUNGLE WAS A WEBWORK OF INTER-connected forms, a tangle of shining tubes. The individual growths varied from faceted cylinders the size of a

man's leg, to great pylons a meter or more in cross-section. There were no true curves in the crystal shapes, but the planar surfaces shifted direction frequently enough that in the distance the jungle seemed full of muscularly sinuous shapes. Nomun had to pick his way carefully; sometimes he had to crawl through tiny openings. The groundcover punctured his hands and knees, and he considered climbing into the upper story, where progress might be easier, but then he remembered Blue Nomun's warnings. As he penetrated deeper into the jungle, the light grew stronger, the crystal less weathered, and he detected a faint hum. He thought of machinery buried deep. *No, a great hive—sleeping memories like sleeping bees*, he thought, and it seemed a true perception.

He saw darkness ahead. He moved forward more cautiously, until he reached the edge of a clearing. Inside, the crystal had decayed into glittering black gravel, with a few lightless twisted stumps rising here and there. Blue Nomun stood in the dimness at the center, motionless, still calling out in an amplified voice.

Nomun waited. Minutes passed, and Nomun heard the others moving through the concealment of the jungle.

Abruptly, Blue Nomun fell silent. He turned slowly, as if searching the edge of the clearing. Nomun surmised that Blue Nomun's vision was augmented into the infrared range. He wondered how many of the others owned dangerous bodymods, and then it occurred to him to wonder about his own body. He looked down at his killer's hands. Did he feel anything? Frustration? Fear? Anger? His hands knotted. Nothing. He still had nothing but his name. And the conviction that it was *his*.

Blue Nomun spoke. "Good. We are all here. I called to you not because I was concerned about your counterfeit lives, but

because I wish to preserve my own valuable self."

A piece of crystal sailed out of the jungle and shattered against Blue Nomun's chestplate. His face showed no reaction. "Childish," he said. "Listen carefully, if you wish to live. The memwort supports a large population of parasitic organisms. For example: small but dangerous predators hunt the ganglian symbiotes. Avoid open areas such as this." Blue Nomun swept his arm to indicate the clearing. "After moonrise they become killing grounds. The predators are not formidable individually, but in large numbers they can easily bring down a man. Though of course they would be poisoned by such a meal. This posthumous revenge would be small consolation to me."

"The ganglia are dangerous, as I have already stated, and they will become much more so shortly, when the Blood Moon rises. The ganglia will enter the active mode then, and a misstep by one of us may cost all of us our lives."

A voice spoke from the other side of the clearing. "How are we to avoid this 'misstep'?" Nomun recognized Handsome Nomun's smooth tones.

A look of pedantic irritation crossed Blue Nomun's face. "Yes. I was just getting to that. Please, no more interruptions; moonrise is near and I, for one, wish to reach the internode with my head attached to my body. To continue: the primary danger is that one of us will stumble against an active ganglion and thereby precipitate a synaptic storm. If that happens, all who remain on the node will be trapped in a memory-fugue. Do you understand? We are threatened by the memories of an unknown being, memories in all likelihood incompatible with our own mnemonic substrates. At best, the fugue would expose us to the predators—or to those among us who recover most rapidly."

Blue Nomun turned and looked severely at a spot just to Nomun's left, and Nomun surmised that Scar Nomun lurked there. "At worst, the fugue will be irreversible, an endless loop, and we will all still be standing in the jungle at daylight, trapped in a stranger's memories, waiting for the killmech and its cabbage knife."

Scar Nomun stepped from concealment and moved toward Blue Nomun, hands clenched. "Why should I believe you? Perhaps this is all *your* game, perhaps you're attempting to amuse yourself at my expense."

Blue Nomun looked at Scar Nomun without emotion. "Fool," he said. "You—grotesque corrupt piece of meat that you are—would never understand my amusements. If you will not listen, you could destroy us all."

Across the clearing, Jade Nomun appeared. "I tend to agree with the halfmech. I have some knowledge of Coal." Jade Nomun stroked his chin, then the jade in his ear. "The memworts are well-known to be treacherous. To all but their owners. We ought to dispose of the ugly one now, before he makes any more trouble."

Blue Nomun glanced to the east, where a pink luster tinted the darkness above the jungle. "That might be wise, but we have run out of time. The Blood Moon is on the horizon, and I must leave. This is my advice: Do not move in groups, you will attract predators. The safest route is directly over the dorsal ridge of the spine. The predators are most active near the lateral beaches. Above all, do not touch the ganglia; in particular, do not touch them when they are glowing with the pink light. If a storm begins when you are near the internode, run. Perhaps you can reach the beach before it takes you. And do not dally. Coal is a small world, with a very rapid rotation. The night is short." Blue Nomun turned and trudged into the jungle. Scar Nomun made no move to stop him; he was watching Jade Nomun. Jade Nomun drifted forward, hands twitching idly at his sides, a look of benign good humor on his face.

Scar Nomun laughed. "No, fop. I won't give you any easy opportunities. Come after me, if you wish." He melted back into the blue light and was gone.

NOMUN BACKED AWAY FROM THE CLEARING. Was it his imagination, or did slender quick shapes flow along the ground at the far edge? He shuddered and moved faster.

The dorsal ridge, Blue Nomun had said. Nomun followed the rising ground, alert for the sound of pursuit or for the pregnant silence of ambush. The crystal jungle was full of small noises, as if a million tiny creatures scratched and crawled, hidden somehow in the cold radiance that coursed through the tangled forms. Once Nomun heard purposeful steps; later he heard a nervous patter as something ran by him, just out of sight. The jungle was disorienting; the shining shapes seemed to twist away from the eye. Whenever Nomun attempted to follow the pulses of light that surged through the jungle, he would lose his purpose, would find himself slowing in his careful movement. After he realized this, he kept his gaze directly in front of his feet, slightly unfocused, and was able to maintain his momentum.

The Blood Moon rose above the canopy, huge, scarred by vast craters. The crimson light that poured down seemed thick, a viscous light that dripped through the crystal, spattering fire. Nomun noticed a change in the jungle's internal light. Did the memwort's heart beat faster, did it pump a richer blood? A hot dazzling pink began to flow along the crystal. Pulse followed pulse, faster and faster, until the jungle blazed, and Nomun was forced to shield his eyes from the glare.

On the ridge, the jungle abandoned its semblance of chaos and revealed its structure. The web of crystal flowed together into a line of great toroids, marching like fiery vertebrae over the crest of the node toward the distant internode beach. Light whirled fiercely within the toroids, and Nomun stopped for a moment to admire that energetic beauty. The moment stretched out, and Nomun began to imagine he was about to understand something of his situation; perhaps if he just watched long enough, opened himself to the light, somehow he might remember. *What memories they must carry*, he thought, and he began to feel a frightening urge. By the time Nomun reached the dorsal ridge, he wanted to press himself to the glow, to fill the empty places in his mind.

He approached the nearest toroid, moving slowly, as in a dream. It was five or six meters tall, a wreath of light woven from a thousand strands of jungle. He stopped so close to it that he might have reached out and touched its glorious surface. He closed his eyes; the light beat through his eyelids, almost undiminished in intensity. He swayed there, mindless, until a sound from behind alerted him, too late. He turned and ducked, but something glanced off the back of his head, hard enough to pitch him forward against the toroid.

The crystal was hard, and shockingly cold. He twisted onto his back. Jade Nomun stood over him, smiling, holding a heavy chunk of crystal high.

"Time to go, clone," Jade Nomun said.

Nomun struggled to move, but could not, trapped in light thick as honey. He waited for the impact.

But Jade Nomun was trapped in the light, too...frozen in the act of striking. The elegant face was twisted in a snarl of frus-

*Nomun set his foot against Jade
Nomun's neck, shifted his weight
slightly so that the vertebrae creaked
and Jade Nomun gasped. Nomun felt a
fierce delight and laughed.*

tration, but fear had begun to seep into the cloudy eyes.

The light brightened until all vision was lost, replaced by a white glare that filled Nomun utterly.

...AND HE WAS A CHILD IN HIS MOTHER'S HARDCAR, RIDING through Howlytown. His mother, deep in conversation with her womanfriend Marlain, paid no attention to him, so he amused himself by peering through the armored window at the strange life of Howlytown.

The streets lay between rivers of light in the early evening. The programmable facades of the crumbling buildings flashed a million messages, projected a thousand colorful scenes. Most of it made no sense to him, but he was fascinated, all the same. Usually he could catch only a tantalizing glimpse of Howlytown before his mother opaqued the window, and so he was trying to make the most of this rare opportunity.

Few of Howlytown's inhabitants were out so early, but there were still plenty of amazing sights. On one corner he saw a fire dancer, turning cartwheels inside her cloud of green and blue flame. Across the street, an elderly mnemon sat in a steel kiosk, guarded by two huge mechdogs. The sign above his kiosk read: "New Regrets for Old." The mechdogs lay on either side of the kiosk, waving the huge pink pompoms attached to their tails. Nomun laughed.

AT THE NEXT CROSS STREET, THE HARDCAR paused for a moment, to allow a great steel landbarge to pass. The barge scraped slowly down the street, striking an occasional spray of sparks from the littered surface. It displayed the red skull-and-spiral logo of one of Howlytown's warlords; the muzzles of grasers emerged from turrets at either end of the top deck.

While they waited, Nomun saw an ugly sight. A procession of naked men and women emerged from the dark mouth of an alley, cabled together neck-to-neck. They were led by a rotund dwarf wearing lavender armor. The coffle shuffled to a stop by the curb, so close to Nomun that he might have reached out and touched one of the men, had there been no glass between them. The man had a lean wolfish face; in his eyes was a disturbing absence. *Slaves*, Nomun thought, feeling both pity and curiosity.

Slowly the man turned and looked at Nomun. Or so it seemed,

although the hardcar's windows were set for one-way vision. The man's eyes drifted away for a moment, then snapped back, filled abruptly with fierce nameless emotion. He reached for his shoulder, twisted at something there, and the arm fell off. There was no blood. Nomun caught a glimpse of something metallic where the arm had disconnected.

With an unnaturally swift movement, the man bent, picked up his arm by the wrist and slammed it against Nomun's window, though no sound penetrated the armored glass. He dropped his arm, jerked away the arm of the woman next to him. She reacted with dull bemusement, swaying and smiling. The man drew back to strike the hardcar again with his new weapon, and then the dwarf was on him, slashing at him with a painstick. The man fell to his knees, unconscious, eyes rolled up into his head, supported only by the cable that leashed him to the others.

The dwarf picked up the woman's arm, turning it this way and that, as if inspecting it for damage. Eventually he locked it back on her shoulder. At his direction she flexed it. The dwarf turned his attention to the man's arm, shaking his helmeted head over the arm's condition. Nomun could see split flesh and ruptured conduit.

The hardcar moved on. Nomun glanced at his mother. She had noticed nothing, nor had Marlain.

Just before they reached the security lock that led out of Howlytown, the hardcar passed through a crowd of grim-faced women dressed in black. Nomun stared at them with such intensity that Marlain glanced out.

"Oh," Marlain said. "The Barrens."

"What's wrong with them, Mother?" Nomun asked, for even to his young eyes it was obvious that something *was* dreadfully wrong.

His mother smoothed his hair and opaqued the window. "They have no children," she said. "They live outside the Pale, so they must carry the Korr virus. Else they would breed us all to death. They are allowed no children, either of the egg or of the flesh. Do you understand? They are sterile; and also their cells are useless to the cloners."

"The enforcers should drive them away," Marlain said. "Like vultures, they seem to me. Did you hear what happened in Dark-way Howlytown? Just last week it was. A man and his daughter were waiting at the security lock, as we are. A fire started in the rotor pods, and they were forced out of their car. The Barrens swarmed over them, with their scrapers and tissue vials. By the time the enforcers came out, the poor little girl's hands were nothing but bones and tatters."

"Marlain!" said Nomun's mother, pulling him close.

"Sorry, I'm sorry. But it's horrid, somehow, to think that in a few years Howlytown will be infested with a thousand copies of that innocent one." Marlain shook her head, her face a mask of disapproval.

His mother held him tightly. "Don't worry, Nomun. That could never happen to you."

THE JUNGLE WAS QUIESCENT, LIT ONLY BY an occasional blue flicker. Jade Nomun was sprawled across Nomun's legs, still clutching the piece of crystal with which he had meant to brain Nomun. Nomun pushed him away and the elegantly dressed body rolled bonelessly to its back.

Perhaps he is dead, Nomun thought. The idea was pleasant, and he sat back against the now-dark toroid, to gather his strength.

He recalled the fugue-memory. How comforting it must be, to have a head full of such things, instead of this aching emptiness. But now he had at least one, even if it was not his own. Though perhaps it was; the mother had called her child Nomun. He considered the possibility that the memwort belonged to him, or to one of the others who claimed the name. He laughed. Absurd. Why would the owner expose himself willingly to the dangers of the memwort, and to the more deadly hatreds of his clones?

He looked up and realized he could no longer see the Blood Moon. What had Blue Nomun said? The nights are short on Coal. Nomun struggled to his feet. How much time was left? He thought of the killmech, and a shudder ran up his back.

Jade Nomun stirred and groaned. Nomun felt disappointment. He cast about for Jade Nomun's weapon, picked it up, looked down at the dark features. He raised the shard high.

"No, don't," Young Nomun said. He stood beside the next toroid, leaning against it as if exhausted.

"He tried to kill me," Nomun said, but without passion. He let the crystal drop. "Why do you care? He would kill you without a thought; he would kill us all."

"Yes. But he is a part of me. Or I of him." Young Nomun laughed, shakily. "Will you help me carry him?"

"Insane. There might not be enough time for an encumbered man to reach the beach, if the cyborg can be believed. Leave him; perhaps he will revive and save himself—though I hope not." Nomun turned away, began to trot through the dark crystal. As he ran, Young Nomun's face filled his mind's eye. So young. Abruptly, he felt ancient. *How old am I?* he wondered.

The going was easier along the dorsal ridge, and soon the ground sloped downward. Nomun glanced up; was the sky growing light? He ran faster, sometimes brushing against a crystal in the semidark. Nothing terrible happened, and he assumed that the synaptic storm had temporarily neutralized the organism.

NOMUN WAS THE FIRST TO ARRIVE. A NARROW CRESCENT OF GLITTERING sand had collected against the ridge of black crystal that snaked between the terminal node and the next node—on this beach an inflatable orange shelter had been erected.

He stopped, breathing deeply. His heart thumped, but slowly. *I still have my strength*, he thought.

Inside the shelter he found ten cots, and a neat stack of water canisters and self-heating food packs. He held back for a moment, wary of poison; then he uncapped a canister and drank. If their captor had wanted them to die outright, the mech

could have killed them all.

Others arrived. Blue Nomun's face showed nothing, Pump Nomun's eyes were dreamy, Scar Nomun bared his teeth in a humorless grin, False Nomun's hands shook. One by one they came into the shelter, and Nomun felt the pressure of their hatred, though no one spoke. Nomun went to the shelter's entrance and watched the jungle's edge.

Just before the sun rose, Jade Nomun emerged.

Jade Nomun walked past Nomun, but Nomun put a hand on the other's arm. "Where is he?"

Jade Nomun looked at Nomun, and his nostrils flared. He chopped at Nomun with a reptilian quickness, but Nomun was quicker, and caught the hand. His body moved without thought, effortlessly, precisely, twisting Jade Nomun's arm, forcing Jade Nomun to his knees. Nomun applied more pressure, and Jade Nomun's face descended to the sand. Nomun set his foot against Jade Nomun's neck, shifted his weight slightly so that the vertebrae creaked and Jade Nomun gasped. Nomun felt a fierce delight and laughed. The skill he used now was right, was true, was as much a part of him as his name. "Where is he?" Nomun asked again.

"Who?" Jade Nomun spit out sand, writhed, but could not escape Nomun's grip.

"The young one. The one who persuaded me not to kill you in the jungle." Nomun laughed again. "He was right; pleasure deferred is pleasure doubled."

"Ah...the infant."

Nomun leaned into his foot, just a little more, and the sensation was an exquisitely familiar one. Bone, singing with stress, on the brink of failure; how many times had he felt that sweet ominous tremble? The thought disturbed him, though only in a cold distant way that did not touch the joy of the moment.

"Wait," Jade Nomun whispered. "I have information; if I die you may die too."

A sound from the edge of the jungle attracted Nomun's attention. Young Nomun stood there, swaying. Blood covered his face; his eyes were unfocused. Behind him, Nomun saw a flash of dull red through the crystal. *Dead Nomun*, he thought. He released Jade Nomun, then rolled him away with a kick to the ribs. Jade Nomun huddled on the sand, curled around his injury, gagging.

Nomun ran for the jungle and reached Young Nomun just as the killmech stepped into view. He pulled Young Nomun's arm across his shoulders, half-carried him to the safety of the sand.

The killmech spoke in a great voice, so loud that Nomun winced. "Be advised. You must rest here until dark, using the provided facilities. You may not leave the beach before dark. When the sun is gone, you must enter the next node. The same strictures apply."

Nomun looked at Dead Nomun's chest. A third bag hung there now, heavy with Handsome Nomun's beautiful head.

NOMUN HELPED YOUNG NOMUN INTO THE SHELTER AND LOWERED him to one of the cots. He took a napkin from one of the food packs and began to wipe blood from Young Nomun's forehead. The others stared.

"A nursemaid," Scar Nomun said. "Come minister to me." His mouth was full of food; his good eye gleamed. He clutched at his crotch and sniggered.

Jade Nomun slumped on his cot, but he snorted with weary contempt. "Don't be fooled, clone. The old one is still formidable. He wears his wrinkles for effect. I would wager to the extent of my fortune that he could chew you up and spit you out. And not break a sweat."

Scar Nomun replied scornfully. "You perhaps. Not I."

"You did not see, did you, ugly one?"

"I did," said Blue Nomun. "The fop is correct. The old one is competent. Even I would not care to test his skills."

Young Nomun's eyes finally cleared, drifted to Nomun. "You were right," he said, in a small scratchy voice. "We should have killed him."

"Then you would be dead now yourself," Jade Nomun said. "Why do you suppose you still live, boy? The killmech stopped me from finishing the job, that's why. It informed me that we weren't to kill each other on the nodes—that to do so was to commit suicide."

Scar Nomun glared, said, "You lie to protect your weakness."

Then Blue Nomun spoke. "Interesting. We seem to be in the hands of a meticulous madman. I will venture a theory: he calls himself Nomun."

"Yes. The dream," said False Nomun in a small voice.

"Indeed," said Blue Nomun. "The fugue was the same for us all, was it not? Nomun the child, riding through some Howlytown with his mother? This is the nature of the synaptic storm, as I understand it: it was no dream we all shared; it was the prime memory of the terminal node. The memory which best represents the memories held in that array." The cyborg's face was closed and dark; Blue Nomun seemed to have lost some crucial confidence during the night in the jungle. "Furthermore, I am forced to face an unhappy fact. I must conclude that I am not the original Nomun, as I have believed for all my long life."

"How so?" Jade Nomun sat up carefully, holding his ribs.

"The memwort. It may be as old as fourteen hundred standard years. It is certainly no younger than eleven hundred. This I deduce from the size of the terminal node, the diameter of the dorsal toroids, the degree of parasitism. And other factors beyond your comprehension." Blue Nomun's chin dropped onto his metal chest. "I am eight hundred and seventy-three years of age."

Nomun looked around at the faces. Pump Nomun did not seem to care; the rothead was absorbed in resetting the keys of his chempump. Scar Nomun did not believe. False Nomun had already admitted that he was a clone. Young Nomun did not seem surprised. On Jade Nomun's drawn face, angry comprehension grew.

"No!" Jade Nomun shouted. "No! I *am* Nomun. No other can be. You are lying, or you are wrong." Jade Nomun took a deep breath, struggled visibly for control. "And Nomun is not so uncommon a name. Why must the Nomun who seeded the memwort be related to us?"

"If not," said Blue Nomun heavily, "then we witness an astounding coincidence. All of us rose from the same genetic root; each calls himself Nomun. If the Nomun of the memwort is not our clonebrother, then what other explanation for our presence here would you suggest?"

Nomun saw a fearful madness kindle in Jade Nomun's cloudy eyes. "No, I will never believe it."

Blue Nomun shrugged. "As you will. I care nothing for what you believe. Here is an undeniable fact: at least nine of us are clones of the original Nomun. Nomun the Great. Nomun the Emancipator. Nomun the Scourge. Some of my titles now seem ludicrous to me. Nomun the Only, for example." Blue Nomun stopped, and silence filled the shelter.

Finally Blue Nomun spoke again. "Are any of us old enough to be the true Nomun? You, for example?" He gestured at Scar Nomun.

"I will not say," answered Scar Nomun.

"Just so." Blue Nomun lay back on the cot with a sigh, as if his metal body was tired.

"Perhaps it's him, the old one." False Nomun was watching Nomun, his eyes full of fearful conjecture.

"Nonsense. I am the Nomun," snapped Jade Nomun. "Besides, the wrinkles he wears are cosmetic; I know this from bitter experience."

No one else spoke. After a bit the others settled in their cots, though no eyes closed. Young Nomun looked up at Nomun. The boy was still confused by the blow to his head, or so it seemed to Nomun. "I would like to sleep," Young Nomun said. "But I'm afraid. I might never wake."

"Sleep," Nomun said. "I'll watch. Later you can do the same for me."

Somewhat to Nomun's surprise, Young Nomun smiled agreement, and his eyes fluttered shut. *He still trusts*, Nomun thought. *How sad.*

YOUNG NOMUN SLEPT AWAY THE SHORT Coal day. Nomun felt little desire to rest; he was too conscious of the others and their hatred.

When the shadows were long, Nomun went to the entrance to the shelter and looked out.

Dead Nomun stood motionless on the beach, not five meters away. The black photoreceptors regarded Nomun steadily, but the killmech did not otherwise react to Nomun's presence.

Nomun's gaze dropped to the three plastic bags attached to the killmech's chest. Except for the Nomun killed by Scar Nomun on the terminal beach, the faces did not look dead. They seemed to sleep, though Soft Nomun's eyes were open. *Trophies?* The thought seemed true, and he wondered what sort of man would make trophies of his own face. A monster, certainly.

"Why are we here?" Nomun asked. Dead Nomun showed no reaction. Nomun tried another question. "Who is your master?"

The armor that protected the killmech's speaker grille louvered open. "Nomun is his name." The louvers closed.

Nomun retreated within, chilled. False Nomun stood there, hands twisted together. "Who were you talking to?"

"The mech's here. The sun is going." Nomun brushed past him, going to Young Nomun's cot.

Nomun shook Young Nomun's shoulder lightly. "Wake up," he said.

Young Nomun came to with a start and struck out blindly. Nomun caught his arms. "Calmly, calmly..." Nomun said. Awareness flooded back into Young Nomun's eyes. He sat up too quickly and winced.

False Nomun spoke in a wheedling voice. "Are you the one? Will you spare me? I only took the name to get a little respect, to have some of the things that come so easily to others. I did no harm; I took none of your money. Please, let me go. Why must I die?"

Nomun found False Nomun repellent; the sweating staring face, so like his own, made him a little sick. "I can't help you," he said. False Nomun shuffled away, muttering incomprehensibly.

Young Nomun was still pale. "I don't want to die either," he said.

"Nor do I. Are you strong enough to climb the next node?"

Young Nomun smiled, touched the gash on his forehead. "I'll have to be, won't I?"

"Listen," Nomun said. "We can keep within shouting distance."

If you're attacked, call out, and I'll come. You can do the same. Do you agree?"

"With relief...."

JUST BEFORE SUNDOWN, THE SEVEN NOMUNS LEFT THE TENT AND stepped warily away from the killmech, which did not move.

"Perhaps it has malfunctioned," said False Nomun hopefully.

Jade Nomun laughed carefully. "You're the greatest fool of us all, clone." Jade Nomun wore an improvised binding around his ribs, torn from the full sleeves of his shirt. "You'll die soon, and we will no longer have to look at your quivering face."

Of them all, only Pump Nomun seemed calm. He stood a little apart from the others, close to the water, watching the breathboats come ghosting in. His eyes were dreamy; he caressed the keyboard of his pump with languid fingers. "Beautiful," he said softly. He turned to the others. "Isn't this lovely? Look around. I marvel. The perfect darkness of the sea, the fading lavender of the sky, the sand that shimmers. The boats, like dreams. Even that thing." He pointed to Dead Nomun. "Its color the perfect counterpoint to this world, its purpose in perfect resonance with our lives." He shook his head. "Have you killed as often as I have, brothers?" His thin face twisted with transitory pain. "My pump is nearly dry. I'd meant to top it up, just before I was taken. Had I done so, this adventure might have ended differently for me."

"Rothead nonsense," said Scar Nomun.

"Yes, yes, you're right. Wonderful nonsense," said Pump Nomun, smiling. "But my chemicals...they insulated me from what Nomun must do, all these centuries, so that I could act—and not be corrupted by the terrible terrible things Nomun must do, if he is to be Nomun. It saved me from becoming a mindless brute like you." Pump Nomun looked at Jade Nomun. "And from your hungry nothingness." He looked at False Nomun. "From your fear." At Blue Nomun. "Nor did I give up my humanity to a machine. The pump was my armor."

Then Pump Nomun's face grew sad. "But it wasn't the perfect solution. It has taken my strength."

The breathboats anchored off the beach, closer than they had been the first night. The pale-haired captain came down from her pulpit and stood at the rail, apart from the passengers. Her shadowed face held some strong emotion. Sorrow? Concern? Despair? Nomun could not tell.

"Vultures," said Scar Nomun, and spat into the water.

The killmech moved, and the Nomuns retreated toward the second node, all but Pump Nomun.

"You must leave the beach now," Dead Nomun said, and gestured at the next node.

Pump Nomun turned to look out over the water. "Lovely," he whispered, and triggered his pump. His eyes rolled back, and he stood there for a moment, shuddering, before he fell face down on the sand. A last tremor shook him; then he was still.

The killmech bounded forward. It turned the body over.

Pump Nomun's face had become a red ruin. As they watched, more of Pump Nomun's head deliquesced and ran through the killmech's hands into the sand. Dead Nomun emitted a terrible wordless grinding sound and slashed off the remnant, but by the time it had clipped the bag to its chest clamp, the bag held nothing but the chempump, floating in gray-pink slime.

The corpse was gone, melted into the beach, leaving behind only a pile of empty clothing.

"Clever," said Blue Nomun. "He cheated our captor of his trophy. A hyper-efficient enzyme, no doubt." The cyborg seemed envious. "I wonder: did he always carry it, hidden in the pump?"

"What does it matter?" said Scar Nomun, and went into the jungle. Jade Nomun followed, still moving with painful care.

Then False Nomun slipped away, making a small whimpering sound deep in his throat.

"Well," said Blue Nomun. "Just us." He watched Nomun with too-bright eyes. "I side with the frightened one. It is you, old one, is it not?"

Nomun shrugged helplessly. He felt a strong desire to tell the cyborg of his memory loss, but held back, afraid to admit to any weakness.

"You will not say? I'm not surprised. What I cannot understand is this: why have you chosen to expose yourself to the same dangers your victims face? Madness does not run strongly in the Nomun flesh. None of us seem truly psychotic, with the possible exception of the fop." Blue Nomun rubbed his metal hands delicately across his human face. "Well, no matter," he said, and walked into the jungle.

Young Nomun's eyes were large. "Is it true? Are you the one?"

"The cyborg is losing function," Nomun said, and after he said it, he saw that it was true. "He won't last much longer; the situation is too novel."

The sun was almost gone, and Dead Nomun stirred threateningly. "Go or die," it said.

"I prefer to go," said Young Nomun. He looked at the killmech with a trembling smile.

"Go, then," said Nomun. "I'll follow at a hundred paces. Call out if you need me. Loudly."

THE SECOND NODE ROSE MORE STEEPLY THAN THE FIRST, AND THE crystal growths grew more massively from the memwort's back. However, Nomun moved with greater ease, as he grew used to the terrain. He could hear Young Nomun ahead, crunching through the ground frost.

The light in the jungle was still blue, and glancing back, Nomun could see no sign of the Blood Moon. Perhaps the moon would not rise until he had reached the second internode. The thought cheered Nomun, and he increased his speed. He began to catch an occasional glimpse of Young Nomun, who seemed able to maintain a good pace, despite the blow to his head. Nomun was pleased. The young one was, as far as he could tell, the only truly human person among them. *I wonder if any of us deserve to survive...*? Nomun thought.

BY THE TIME THE BLOOD MOON SHOWED above the canopy, Nomun was almost happy. When the jungle began to pulse with the hot light, he slowed a little, took more care with his movements. Perhaps they might both survive. Who knew what waited for them at the memwort's last node; perhaps rescue, or even reward?

These pleasant thoughts occupied him for long minutes, to such an extent that he did not notice the storm until Young Nomun shouted, and the brilliance swept over him, washing everything away.

...AND HE DOCKED HIS SHIP WITH THE DILVERMOON BEANSTALK. The terminal habitats glowed, their thousands of ports like colored spangles sewn to the black cloak of space. He watched the curving silver of the planet's hull, until his ship sheathed herself in the cradle.

He shut down the ship's systems one by one. The noises he had lived with during the month-long return from Mavark died away and left him alone with his triumph. Alive. He was still alive.

When he stepped down into the concourse, he was surprised by the size of the crowd. Every corner of that vast space was packed with newssels, each equipped with a camera. Every eye, human and machine, was fixed on him.

A semicircle of red-uniformed guards held open a space directly before him. An old herman in elegant Dilvermoon garments bowed to him, his/her face composed into lines of dignified joy.

"Greetings, Nomun," he/she said, in a rich strong voice. "Dilvermoon is honored by your presence. The world is yours."

A roar came from the crowd and Nomun smiled.

After the speeches, after the questions, after Nomun's triumphant procession through the crowd, the old herman and his/her guards escorted Nomun to the beanstalk, and they rode down toward Dilvermoon in an expensively appointed private car.

The herman splashed a pale mauve liquid into a goblet of pink corundum and handed it to Nomun.

"What is this?" Nomun asked. The liquor had a heavy sweet fragrance; Nomun thought of tropical flowers and rot.

"Mavark brandy, Emancipator. You appreciate the irony?"

Nomun set the goblet down, untasted. "To an extent."

"That is a precious substance, Emancipator; far more so now that you have freed the serfs that formerly went down into the heatlands. You know, to collect the fruit from which it was made." The herman sipped from his/her own goblet; his/her old face softened with delight. "My combine is particularly grateful to you. We control three hundred megaliters; we'll profit heavily before the former serfs resume the harvest."

"They'll never do so. Humans die too easily in the heatlands."

The herman laughed, though not rudely. "This is the first great revolution you have made, is it not? I suppose idealism is a necessity to one like you, still young in your craft. As necessary as a knowledge of weapons and tactics."

The old herman wore condescension like a second skin, but Nomun smiled. What did it matter? He was Nomun. The universe was his.

The herman returned his smile. "You're amused? That's good. The drop to the shell will take thirty minutes; make yourself comfortable." The herman pointed to a deep soft chair by the videopanel, and Nomun sat down.

The herman settled into a chair opposite Nomun's, raised his/her goblet and drank again. "So. Tell me, is it good to be a famous lion?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Of course. But surely there are drawbacks?"

Nomun let his smile slip away. "Not that I've noticed. Educate me, please."

"That would be presumptuous. What could I, a simple trader, teach a great emancipator? Yes, you will be great, Nomun. I've predicted this, and prediction...that's my skill. I'm rarely wrong. You have all the qualities you will need to be first in your profession: intelligence, ruthlessness, will, courage, reckless commitment."

Nomun's heart filled.

"I see that I have pleased you," he/she said. "But consider. With great fame comes great change. A new set of problems. For example; your cells will become very valuable to the cloners. A child of your flesh will bring a fine price in the market of any world to which your fame has penetrated. As your fame grows the price will grow too."

Nomun, transfixed by the glitter of his/her knowing eyes, could not respond. The light in the car seemed to dim, and the herman's voice dropped to an intimate purr. "Irony, that is the true constant in life, don't you agree, Great Nomun? You have made your lifework the freeing of slaves; but your competence

at that work will generate a vast number of new slaves. And all of them will be you."

Nomun stood abruptly, moved to the nearest port, looked down upon Dilvermoon's steel surface. "I'll guard my flesh. What you suggest won't happen."

The herman laughed. "Did you not feel the touches as you moved through the crowd? Show me your hands, Great Nomun." Nomun raised his hands, looked at them. They trembled as he turned them over. Tiny red scratches marked both sides.

WHEN THE LIGHT FADED, NOMUN found himself lying under a heavy horizontal crystal, pressed back into the hollow, as if he hid from some enemy too terrible to fight. He lay there, heart pounding, examining his hands in the exhausted blue light. They were covered with scars, large and small. A thin white knife cut crossed the back of his left hand, two fingers and the thumb of the right hand bore ring scars where missing digits had been regrown. *Inclusive*, he thought. *His profession was evidently a violent one.*

Eventually he got to his feet, moved on through the jungle. Within thirty meters, he came upon Young Nomun, leaning against a column of milky crystal, forehead pressed to the cool surface. In approaching, Nomun made some small sound, and Young Nomun whirled, wide-eyed.

"Just me," Nomun said. "Can you walk?"

"Yes," Young Nomun said, in a hoarse voice. "Yes, I can. You remembered Nomun's first triumph?"

Nomun nodded.

"A hideous memory," Young Nomun said. "I begin to understand the hatred the others bear for each other. But if we are clones, is it our fault?"

The answer stuck in Nomun's throat. With an act of will, he forced it out. "No." *Why was that so difficult to say*, he wondered. "Come. We should hurry. I'll go first this time." Nomun trotted away, and didn't look back at Young Nomun.

They reached the next internode without further mishap, well before the rising of the red sun.

No one else was in the shelter when they went inside. The shelter seemed identical to the first, with its ten cots and its pile of provisions. Young Nomun lowered himself heavily to one and put his face into his hands.

Nomun fetched two canisters and a handful of food packets. "Here. Eat; then we'll rest."

Young Nomun took a canister. "I've changed my mind. You cannot be the one. Why would you trouble yourself over me, if you were?" He took a long swallow, and Nomun was pleased to see that his color was better.

Young Nomun continued. "Let's choose a name for the one who brought us here. First Nomun, perhaps? What do you think?"

Nomun shrugged, said nothing.

"Then that's what I'll call him. To him: First Nomun." Young Nomun raised his water canister in a mock toast. He looked at Nomun, raising his eyebrows. "Tell me something. Do you find the similarity of our names as confusing as I do? I've made up names for each of us; it helps me to keep them straight. And you...?"

Nomun nodded, smiled.

"Ah... For example, I call the scarred one Bloody Nomun. Appropriate? And the mad fop? Sick Nomun. The frightened

Scar Nomun staggered from the jungle, just ahead of the killmech. His right arm flopped; blood soaked the tattered sleeve of his unisuit. His left hand clamped the artery, his face was white.

one? Not Nomun." Young Nomun lay back on the cot, fixed his gaze on Nomun. "It would please me to know what you call me."

Nomun hesitated for a moment, then answered. "Well. I think of you as Young Nomun. And so? What do you call me?"

"Young Nomun? Indeed? I no longer feel so young. As for you, why..." Young Nomun's eyes dropped. "I mean no offense, but I think of you as Empty Nomun."

Nomun turned away. In empty silence.

Young Nomun laughed, a not-entirely pleasant sound. "Let us discuss our captor. Would you agree that he has an obsessive focus on the children of his flesh? The cyborg mentioned a 'prime memory,' did he not? I would guess that the next node will serve up yet another memory related to First Nomun's horror of his clones. By the way, I don't think we'll be able to avoid the storm, no matter how carefully we move. I think that even if none of us are clumsy, the killmech will initiate the sequence. It's obvious the memories are part of the entertainment."

Something stirred at the entrance, and Nomun turned to see Jade Nomun stumble in and throw himself on a cot, breathing heavily.

"The others?" Young Nomun asked.

Jade Nomun replied with a wordless snarl. False Nomun came in, face drawn.

"Well, where were we," said Young Nomun. "Oh yes. Clones. It appears now that we are all clones. I knew of course that children of my flesh—our flesh—exist. There must be many of them, on thousands of worlds. Too many to count. So why were we singled out for chastisement?"

"Because we took the name. The name, the fame, the presence. That's why." False Nomun no longer seemed so frightened, as if some of his fear had burned away in the night. He took food and water, retired to the farthest corner of the shelter.

Nomun went to the entrance in time to see Scar Nomun stagger from the jungle, just ahead of the killmech. His right arm flopped; blood soaked the tattered sleeve of his unisuit. His left hand clamped the artery, but his face was white.

Dead Nomun stopped at the jungle's edge. Five bags now hung from its clamps. Frayed silver cables sprouted from the new trophy's neck. Blue Nomun's face was as calm in death as it had been in life.

Nomun stood aside as Scar Nomun entered the shelter. Scar Nomun sat heavily on a cot, spoke through gritted teeth. "Get me a tourniquet."

No one responded. Scar Nomun glared at each in turn, looked last at Young Nomun. "So you've learned wisdom." He rose painfully, went to the provisions, and stripped a wrapper from

one of the food packs. He twisted it into a band between his teeth and good hand. Then, with great difficulty, he tied it around his upper arm and twisted the knot until it slowed the flow of blood.

"I won't die so easily," he said.

"What happened?" Young Nomun leaned forward, took a healthy bite of his food.

Young Nomun has changed, Nomun thought. *Not surprising.* But Nomun found it a little depressing, for some reason.

SCAR NOMUN LOOKED UP FROM HIS ARM. "Predators,' our late halfmech brother called them. Like a snake with many legs. Or a weasel with scales. When the Blood Moon rises, they gather into packs. The pack I met was a small one, but they have no restraint. They would slash at me and die the next instant, poisoned, writhing in a ball. I crushed a dozen of them. They kept coming until they were all dead and I was as you see."

Jade Nomun laughed uproariously. "How appropriate; how satisfying. Eaten by your scaly brothers. I suppose they're much like you—stupid, brutal, persevering. And you poisoned them?"

Oddly, Scar Nomun joined in the laughter, laughed until he drowned out Jade Nomun, who subsided uneasily. "I'm flattered," Scar Nomun said finally. "Well, you'll meet my 'brothers' soon, fop, and they'll eat you up more quickly than they did me."

Nomun lay back, looked at the orange ceiling of the shelter.

"You're sleepy?" Young Nomun asked. "Rest. I'll watch; I'm much stronger today."

Nomun looked toward Young Nomun. A series of ambiguous emotions seemed to flow across the smooth face. Nomun could not bring himself to trust his younger self, but he decided to close his eyes and rest alertly. If Young Nomun attempted to betray him, at least he would learn a valuable fact.

NOMUN'S FATIGUE WAS DEEPER THAN HE HAD REALIZED, AND HE sank into dreamless sleep, until a sound disturbed him. It was a thrumming scramble, covert, quietly violent. Nomun jerked himself awake.

In the corner, False Nomun was rising from Scar Nomun's cot. Scar Nomun lay still, eyes bulging, a twisted food wrapper

biting deeply into his throat.

Jade Nomun lounged on his cot, watching, face taut with amusement. He looked at Nomun. "One more down, eh, clone?"

Nomun glanced at Young Nomun. His face was impassive, relaxed. Young Nomun looked at Nomun, shrugged. "I decided to conserve my strength. That one's no great loss, you will surely agree. And he had lost much blood; how could he have climbed the next node? A mercy, in a way."

"And see, the timid one has developed a little backbone," said Jade Nomun. "Isn't that a gain?" He laughed and laughed, the ugly sound filling the shelter.

A little later Young Nomun spoke in a low voice. "Tell me the truth, Empty Nomun. Would you have defended him?" Young Nomun's eyes were clear and guileless.

Nomun did not answer.

The remainder of the afternoon passed in watchful silence. Nomun felt no further inclination to sleep. Jade Nomun laughed occasionally to himself. False Nomun's face was that of an animate statue, devoid of any purpose beyond the next heartbeat, the next breath. Only Young Nomun seemed able to relax, to doze lightly. Several times Nomun observed Jade Nomun casting a speculative look toward Young Nomun, but when Nomun caught Jade Nomun's eye, the fop smiled and pulled a mask of innocent curiosity over his mad features. *Still dangerous*, Nomun thought. *No. More dangerous. He no longer believes in his own existence. He has nothing to care about anymore.* Nomun resolved never to turn his back on Jade Nomun. Or any of them.

At twilight the four survivors went out onto the glittering sand. Dead Nomun waited for them there, and on the black water the breathboats moved in slow grace.

Nomun stepped to the water's edge. The passengers had discarded their privacy masks; some of the faces seemed familiar. Nomun studied them for a moment, then took an involuntary step backward. Three of the passengers wore his face. They saw his consternation and laughed. One dressed in the same manner as Jade Nomun, but in garments cut from finer fabric, called out. "Yes, we're brothers, Nomuns. But we did not steal the name, so...." The man flung up his arms in an expansive gesture. "We're here, and you're there."

Beside Nomun, Jade Nomun snarled and brought forth a chunk of crystal he had hidden inside his shirt. He threw it at the grinning faces, and it flew true until it struck the barrier. The warning tone rang out, and the crystal burst with a flat ear-hurting crack, became a cloud of drifting sparks.

Young Nomun had come up behind them. "Tell us, what were your plans?" he asked. "Had you not wasted your weapon on the spectators?"

Jade Nomun walked down the beach toward the next node without replying. Nomun noticed that False Nomun was already gone. He looked toward the shelter; realized why False Nomun had left.

"Come," he said to Young Nomun. "Who knows how the mech will react, when it finds the corpse. I would prefer to be in the jungle."

Young Nomun nodded, distractedly. He seemed to be fascinated by the men in the breathboats. "Is this such a famous event, then? That our brothers gather from the stars to watch us?"

Nomun did not reply. He walked quickly down the beach, so that Young Nomun had to trot to catch him before he reached the blue glow of the jungle.

"Wait, Empty. Do we have the same arrangement?" He made to touch Nomun's shoulder, but Nomun slid away from his outstretched hand. Young Nomun seemed surprised, then angry. "You mocked me for sparing the mad one. Do you criticize me now for not saving the brute?"

Nomun looked at him. "No, no. Who am I to judge you? Our agreement stands. I'll go first tonight." He turned and stepped under the canopy.

The Blood Moon rose swiftly, a blot of crimson, and almost as soon as the crystal pulsed with hot light, the storm began.

...AND NOMUN'S SHIP DROPPED, ENGINES SILENT, THROUGH THE thick clouds of Hell. *A thousand planets bear that name*, Nomun thought. *But it's especially apt in this case.*

To settle himself into the proper emotional mode for the task ahead, he viewed a recording of FareLord Gegando, First Voice of that race in the Marichaeen Reach.

Gegando addressed the Human Assembly: "...the natural condition of humanity is slavery." The FareLord's silver face was narrow, humanoid except for the eyes—protruding red balls set too far apart. "This truth is self-evident. Even were we to withdraw from those worlds where indentured humans perform the necessary work of the Holdings, their 'freedom' would rapidly prove to be illusory. Occasionally, we are driven from our Holdings by agitators and mercenaries. What happens? Almost instantly, the humans select a new slavemaster. We have seen this over and over." Nomun clicked off the recording, smiled wryly.

Nomun inserted another wafer. His smile faded as he watched. He saw the melt mines, where humans trawled the magma in bottlecars, and died in fiery white implosions. He saw the pens in the highlands where millions lived behind the wire. He saw the deep catacombs full of mindless breeders. He saw the graceful spires of the FareLord palaces, high atop the most stable peaks. *It's good*, he thought. *It's helpful that the FareLords are so easy to hate.*

Nomun pulled the ship out of freefall when he had dropped below the highest ridges of the Moving Mountains, where for a time, he might be safe from FareLord detectors. He landed in a narrow canyon, just below the mouth of a cave from which a boiling river poured.

A welcome party awaited him; three figures muffled in cool-suits. He let them wait, while his ship scanned the landscape for any evidence of treachery. Eventually he shut the ship's systems down and gathered his gear.

He stepped out onto the surface of Hell; his clients indicated with urgent gestures that he was to follow them. They led him up a precarious trail to the lip of the cave.

Just before he went down into Hell's heart, he turned for one last glimpse of his ship. Workers were already covering the hull with concealing pumice.

THEY CONDUCTED HIM TO A COOLROOM under the mountain, where ancient machinery wheezed and strained to keep the temperature bearable. Inside, the welcoming committee stripped off their cool-suits.

The spokesman was a tall cadaverous man with the spiraling tattoos of a firediver. He stepped forward, offered his hand to Nomun. "Welcome, Emancipator. I'm Kronerg; these are my adjutants, Maril and Wumorin." A long uncomfortable moment passed before Nomun touched the hand briefly.

"Yes, welcome," chorused the other two. One was a fat woman with metal eyes, the other a young man wearing a privacy mask, a headband which generated a black mist over his features.

"Thank you," Nomun finally said, since they seemed to expect some response. "Shall we get to work?"

Kronerq's lean face showed surprise. "Now? Will you not rest first, here in the comfort of the room prepared for you?"

Nomun wiped sweat from his forehead, flicked it from his fingertips. *Comfort?* "Your contract is time-based, Kronerq. You say you can pay my fee for nine standard weeks. If I haven't destroyed the FareLords by then, I must leave."

"Surely that will be enough time...."

"Possibly."

Kronerq sighed and sent the young man out. He returned with an armful of maps, charts, and datawafers; these he dumped unceremoniously on a long table.

Kronerq waved his bony arm over the table. "Here is what we have, Emancipator. Profiles of the FareLords, charts of their diggings, troop dispositions, organizational sheets for the various indentured cadres, ecological analysis of the various Holdings, estimates of sympathizer strength in the cadres. Everything else we thought you might have use for."

Nomun leaned over the table, began pushing the mass into some sort of order. "This will do for now," he said. "Leave me."

Kronerq was shocked again. "But, but, Emancipator. We have so much to discuss; I must convey the plan we wish you to carry out...."

Nomun made a gesture of dismissal. "You've somehow gotten the wrong impression. I'm not here to carry out your plans; I'm here to destroy the FareLords. That's what my contract specifies: 'reasonable and diligent efforts to eradicate the FareLord presence on Hell.' Reread it, if you cannot remember. Any plan I execute will be my own."

"Well, of course.... Still, Emancipator, it's a good plan, made by Wumorin, who has demonstrated a fine aptitude during our struggle for independence." The young man nodded, his face still concealed beneath the dark blur of the privacy mask.

Nomun was losing patience. "Then I'll depart and Wumorin will put this paragon of a plan into effect, and you'll save a great deal of money." He reached for his coolsuit.

Kronerq's thin hands twisted together. "Wait, please. You're right, of course. We lack your experience and aptitudes; had we been able to get the FareLords off Hell on our own, we wouldn't have contracted with you. Please, we'll withdraw now and allow you the privacy you require."

When they were gone, Nomun turned to his task, feeding the data into the slate. An hour passed, and he began to develop a clear picture of the situation. He sat back, stretched. The FareLords had been unusually greedy. They had increased the scale of their Holdings on Hell far beyond their ability to control the slaves who won the precious substances from the magma.

In fact, he couldn't immediately see why the slaves hadn't already thrown the aliens back into space. Did the FareLords here possess a remarkably able security chief?

Nomun was still absorbed in his analysis when a red light flared and something exploded against the back of his head, throwing him forward onto the table.

Nomun pulled a thinbeam from his boot as he rolled across the table, then fired at his assailant as he dropped off the other side. The beam punched through Wumorin's chest, hissing.

When Nomun peered cautiously over the edge of the table, he saw Wumorin slumped against the far wall. The cauterized wound was as yet bloodless. A heavy mining laser lay just beyond Wumorin's twitching hand.

For the moment, the young man still lived.

Nomun kept the thinbeam pointed at the adjutant, while he explored the back of his head with cautious fingers. The hair

was burned away, but he was otherwise unharmed. "Are you wondering why you're dead and I'm not? Dermal energy shunt," he said. "The latest tech, expensive as hell. Good thing it worked as advertised, eh? Good thing for me, anyway." Nomun glowed with the euphoria that always accompanied a near-miss. "I thought you were my ally, Wumorin."

Wumorin shrugged, a feeble movement. Then he reached up and clicked off the privacy mask.

The white face was instantly familiar, even with the blood that trickled from the mouth. Nomun had seen it in a thousand mirrors.

He stepped around the table, kicked away the laser. His good humor was gone. "So. Where did they get you?"

The clone twitched and coughed convulsively. The blood that flowed down his chin turned a brighter red. "I don't know. I came here in an embryo bottle." Wumorin grinned, an ugly sight. "You cannot imagine the joy I felt when I discovered that I was a child of the great Nomun's flesh. I'm sure you can't. No."

"Was it that bad?"

Wumorin's head dropped forward. "This is Hell, after all," he mumbled. Then he went on, in a slightly stronger voice. "Don't blame the slaves. They were hoping for a cheap messiah when they bought me. I might have been the one they hoped for. But then I learned who I was. And who you were. Nomun. Admired on a thousand worlds. Great Nomun. So that day I decided to not be the one, to wait until they must send for you."

A puzzle solved, Nomun thought darkly. *Here is the reason why the FareLords are still on Hell.* "How many died while you were waiting to take my place?"

"What does it matter? I would have been *Nomun*. Of course, poor Wumorin would have had to disappear...." Wumorin drew a deep bubbling breath.

"You'd never have gotten into my ship," Nomun said after a while, but the clone was dead.

NOMUN STUMBLED THROUGH THE JUNGLE, spitting out the taste of the memory. It was better when I was empty, he thought.

A hand reached out and took him by

the shoulder, pulled him to a stop. Nomun struck the hand away, whirled, teeth bared. Young Nomun dodged away, his finger to his lips. "Shhh...."

Young Nomun crouched, gesturing for Nomun to follow. They moved downhill, until they could see the black mirror of the sea through the jungle.

"He tried to go too close to the beach," Young Nomun said. On the beach, False Nomun battled a pack of predators. The sand was alive with the fluid shapes; they swirled about False Nomun's feet like surf, rising and falling. With a manic energy, False Nomun swung a long shard of crystal, smashing at the creatures. But there were hundreds.

"You may stay and watch," Young Nomun whispered. "I intend to pass while they're busy with him." He crept away.

False Nomun's blows were slowing. One creature ripped at False Nomun's belly, and a loop of intestine spilled out, to tangle around False Nomun's feet. Arms flailing for balance, False Nomun fell silently, and was covered.

Nomun closed his eyes for an instant. Then he slipped off. When he was over the crest of the node, he began to run, as fast as he could, occasionally bouncing painfully from a low-hanging crystal.

Nomun reached down to curl his hand around Jade Nomun's chin. He dropped his knee onto Jade Nomun's neck, jerked upward at the same time. Jade Nomun's neck broke without resistance.

He reached the beach, almost blind with fear. He fell to the sand, gasping for breath. *Why now*, he wondered. *Why did it take so long for me to be afraid?*

The other two were already in the shelter, as far apart as possible, wearing identical looks of watchful hatred. Neither spoke when Nomun came in, and he was taken aback by the sudden similarity between Jade Nomun and Young Nomun.

The day passed with exquisite slowness. Nomun was exhausted, but felt no urge to sleep. Nor did the others, apparently; they sat staring at nothing. In late afternoon, Nomun ate. After a while, he went outside into the sunlight.

Dead Nomun stood motionless at the jungle's edge. Seven plastic bags hung against its chestplate. False Nomun's head was a red tatter, not recognizably human.

"A bad night for head hunting, eh?" Nomun called out impulsively. He expected no reply, and he was shocked when the killmech responded.

"Yes. My master will be sad. He likes to preserve their memory in some way."

Nomun shook his head. "What is your master's purpose in tormenting us?"

Dead Nomun looked at him. "Purpose?"

Nomun was suddenly furious. "Yes, purpose! Why were we captured, why were we brought here, why do you drive us along the memwort? Why do you kill us? Why?"

The killmech took a step forward, then another. "I do not have that information." Its arms twitched, as if it were disturbed, and Nomun retreated into the shelter, heart pounding, his anger cooling abruptly into fear. *I shouldn't have asked it such questions. It might have answered.* He couldn't imagine why this notion frightened him so badly.

Inside, Jade Nomun mumbled to himself and took no notice, but Young Nomun looked up inquiringly. "The mech is friendly?"

Nomun lay down without answering.

Night finally came, and they went out into the stillness of the beach. Jade Nomun's face was no longer human; he had the look of a cornered animal. His eyes flickered constantly from the killmech to Nomun. He sidled away, moving toward the jungle.

Dead Nomun spoke. "This is the last node. Survivors will be taken off the apex beach, tomorrow at sunrise."

Jade Nomun stopped, listened, his head cocked at a feral angle. "Survivors?" A hideous smile corrupted his face. Then he ran into the jungle on light, quick feet.

Young Nomun stood for a moment, as if waiting for the killmech to speak again, before he trudged away. At the edge

of the sand, he paused to look back at Nomun. Nomun thought: *How terrible to look into my own face and see a stranger.*

A HIGH MIST OBSCURED THE BLOOD MOON. Nomun moved carefully. Jade Nomun's mad, gleeful face floated before his mind's eye. The light in the jungle remained cold, and the shadows were impenetrable. At intervals, Nomun stopped and listened, but he could hear nothing beyond the ragged sound of his own breathing, and the thump of his heart.

He passed the crest of the node without incident. The node fell away steeply to the south, so that Nomun could look out over the jungle canopy. The apex beach formed a wide crescent; within its arms rode a half-dozen breathboats, sails furled, lit only by small green anchor lights. The jungle glowed pale blue, until it ended on the sand. There a narrow zone of hot light flickered. *The last barrier*, Nomun thought. *Fresh memory?*

He moved warily down the slope, but nothing attacked him. He wondered how Young Nomun was doing. Had he already fallen to Jade Nomun's cunning? Nomun felt a sharp twinge of regret...he remembered how Young Nomun had saved him from Scar Nomun. It seemed so long ago.

The slope leveled out. The crystal ganglia were smaller, more delicate, and Nomun surmised that they were still growing. Pink flickered through gaps in the jungle; Nomun slowed, stopped more frequently to listen. Something tightened inside him. He reached out with all his senses, sifting the jungle for the death hidden there. Nothing. He went on.

He paused at the edge of the active zone. Directly before him, slender angular tendrils broke from the glistening surface. They were motionless, but the hot light that pulsed in them gave them a treacherous, shifting quality. He sighed. He took one last look around, listened. Still nothing.

Nomun stepped into the zone, moving with slow-motion caution. The surface seemed to give slightly under his feet, trembling visibly with each careful footstep.

Jade Nomun and Young Nomun came from the jungle's edge. Young Nomun retreated before Jade Nomun, whose face was wild. Pulses of emotion crossed it in slow-breaking waves; hate, fear, pride, horror, triumph.

"Wait," Nomun said, making useless warding gestures.

"Wait," Young Nomun said, as Jade Nomun rushed at him. As Nomun watched helplessly, the two fell among the pink tendrils, tearing at each other.

...AND NOMUN PACED THE CATWALK THAT CIRCLED THE BREATH-boat's main hold. Age and memory pressed on him, so heavy. He shook with that weight; he almost staggered.

At each of the stasis cages, he paused to look up into his own face. "Once again...." He was muttering in a broken voice, and in a lucid moment he thought: *I would seem mad to anyone who listened.* His head jerked around. *Is anyone listening? Watching?* The notion frightened him so much that he had to stop and lean his forehead against the solid reassuring metal of the hull. *No, no...don't be so foolish, old man.*

He calmed himself by a great effort of will.

At the next cage, the frozen face had a terrible scar. *Where did he come from?* He remembered: He had found that Nomun on Sook, had taken him from an armored burrow beneath the Black Tear slave compound. Anger pulsed through him. A Nomun slaver; it was unbearable. He hoped that Nomun died early and painfully. *Oh yes.*

He walked to another cage. The face was beautiful; still Nomun, but transfigured into a mask of nobility and grace. Nomun shuddered. A politician, that one, high in a government that regulated slavery.

"Die, die, you die too," Nomun hissed.

He drifted on. He looked up at a cyborged Nomun. The face was inhumanly calm, the frozen eyes reflecting nothing. Why had he taken this one? *Ah...he was working as a trade analyst.* The consortium that employed him had a thousand tentacles; some of them dipped into the slave trade. *The cyborg must have known....* Nomun drew back, confused by the intensity of his hatred. One of the Nomuns had to survive, at least one.

ANOTHER NOMUN, THIS ONE DRESSED IN elegant garments. Jade gleamed in one ear. The face was Nomun's, but it was as if the familiar features concealed the skull of a hyena. *An assassin,* he thought. *Skilled with poison, skilled with the wire and the pin knife.* He stood for a bit, and another thought crept into his mind. *How are we different, he and I?*

The next cage held a young Nomun, his face unmarked, innocent. Nomun struggled to remember where this one had come from, but his head was too full, aching from the building pressure of memory. *It will be so sweet to shed this weight,* he thought.

Nomun reached out, touched a button. The young Nomun was still motionless, but inside that dark head, the brain caught fire, slowly warmed to the level of dream.

"Can you hear me?" Nomun asked.

The soft calm voice issued from a speaker on the stasis cage. "Yes. What a strange dream."

"What do you dream?" Nomun demanded.

A long pause. Then: "I torture myself efficiently. I refuse to confess, though the pain is terrible. I dig deeper into my flesh, with fire, with knife, with lash. Still I say nothing; perhaps I have nothing to tell, but I will not admit it. I will not give up, I will get the truth out of me or I will die trying. I..."

"Enough," Nomun said. "Enough...." He shuddered, clutched his hands to his head. The young Nomun was picking up transients, the pointless writhings of Nomun's overloaded mind. He

pressed another button, and the Nomun's brain accelerated to a higher level of function. The eyes showed a spark of life now.

Nomun tugged down the headband of a privacy mask, fumbled at the switch. There was a memory associated with that mask; had someone given it to him, long ago? But the memory was gone, given to the memwort. All that remained was a little sore spot where the memory had been. That was the drawback to the memwort—once buried in the crystal the memory was gone...but not its pain. Each trip to the memwort left him clean, but added to the store of sourceless aches in his mind.

He found the switch, and a black mist covered his face. *Why am I hiding my face?* he wondered. *He won't remember any of this when he's thawed.* But Nomun left the mask on.

The voice from the speaker was sharper, more focused. "Where am I? Who are you? Why are you holding me?"

Nomun took a deep breath. "You're at sea, like the rest of us. I'm a man; I took you from wherever I found you because of your name."

"My name?"

"But it isn't your name; it doesn't belong to you. You've stolen it from someone."

"It's the name my parents gave me." The voice seemed puzzled.

"They weren't your parents! They bought you in some alley, from a fleshseller; they brought you home in a jar. Though perhaps you were implanted into the woman's womb."

A pause, as if the young Nomun were pondering this allegation. "I find this hard to believe."

Nomun rubbed at his face, pushed his fingers through his tangled hair. "It's true. Ten thousand Nomuns walk a thousand worlds. You're only an unimportant one. Those who bought you hoped you would do as well as the original Nomun, hoped you would get rich and share your wealth. Where did you grow up? No, don't answer; I know. I don't know the name, but it was on some backwater world where you would be unlikely to hear about the other Nomuns until you'd made your own mark. And then, when you heard, what did you think?"

"It's true that news seldom reaches Melluce. The other Nomuns? Rumors about myself, echoed from far away. Flattering to be the source of legend, so early in my career." The voice paused for a bit. "So you claim to be the original Nomun?" Nomun fingered the privacy mask band. "I never said that."

"If not, why would you care?"

A good question. Nomun tried to follow the thought, but it slipped away, to hide in the confusion filling his head. "What?"

The voice grew sharper. "I asked: why would you care that another uses the name. And what will you do with me?"

Nomun drew a shuddering breath. "I don't care," he lied. "My purpose isn't revenge," he lied again. "A test. That's what this is. Yes. To see which of you is the truest Nomun." As soon as he said it, he felt the truth of it, and the falsehood.

"Truest? What does that mean?"

"Who knows?" Nomun laughed, but the sound of his laughter frightened him. He punched the switch, and the young Nomun fell silent.

He stood beside the stasis cage for a while, as motionless as one of his captives. He heard the anchor chain rattle out of the hawsepipe; a moment later, the pale-haired captain came down the companionway into the hold.

"We're here," she said. "Will you go ashore now?"

"Yes. Immediately. You have your instructions? Is everything clear?"

"Clear," she answered sadly. "Must you do this?"

"Oh yes," he whispered as he moved past her. All he could think about was the crystal. The crystal, waiting to drain away the centuries. "Oh yes."

He went out through a long passageway. On either side, in ranks that reached the ceiling, were hundreds of heads encased in clear plastic blocks. Nomun kept his eyes on his feet; he felt the pressure of all those dead eyes. "Don't blame me," he muttered. "You lost."

NOMUN WOKE WITH THE FIRST SUNLIGHT and raised his face from the glittering sand. The red light slanted across the beach, lit the motionless forms of the others, sprawled in the active zone. On the edge of the sea, Dead Nomun waited. A faint chorus of chimes rang across the black water, and Nomun recognized the sound. *Alarms on the breathboats*, he thought. *They don't want to miss the end.* As he looked, the first of the passengers appeared. They waved; some seemed jovial, some disappointed.

Young Nomun stirred, groaned. After a moment, he got to his knees. "Have we lived?" he asked.

Nomun sat up. "Perhaps." He looked out at the breathboats. Observers crowded the decks; they waited in silence.

A furtive sound from behind claimed his attention. Jade Nomun had revived; his forearm was locked across Young Nomun's throat. The two fell to the ground, struggling.

Nomun sighed. He was abruptly weary, almost too weary to act. But he got to his feet anyway, trudged across the sand.

Young Nomun's movements were weakening; he looked up at Nomun with desperate eyes. Jade Nomun's gaze was blind, his teeth were bared in a painfully wide grin. Tendons stood out on his neck like wire. He wrenched at his forearm and laughed when Young Nomun made a small gagging sound.

"Stop," Nomun said. "Stop it, if you want to live."

Jade Nomun laughed again, eyes incandescent with triumph. "I live now!" He rolled Young Nomun under him and ground his face into the broken diamonds.

Nomun kicked him, felt ribs break. But Jade Nomun's grip didn't slacken. "Oh well," Nomun muttered, and reached down to curl his hand around Jade Nomun's chin. He felt the life surging under the skin. He dropped his knee onto Jade Nomun's neck, jerked upward at the same time. Jade Nomun's neck broke, his head rotated without resistance. His eyes fastened on Nomun, burned for an instant longer, then went dull.

Young Nomun pulled free and lay gasping on the sand.

Good, Nomun thought. *It's good he's alive.* He dropped Jade Nomun's head, got up.

When the killmech moved in to take its trophy, he turned away, stumbled to the edge of the water. He waited there, until the sun was well clear of the horizon, staring at the nearest breathboat. The Nomuns there seemed like inconsequential ghosts and he ignored them.

The pale-haired captain came on deck; when she saw him, she smiled brilliantly and waved.

"Behind you," Young Nomun rasped. Nomun turned, to see Dead Nomun. The killmech was very close; in one metal hand it held some sharp gleaming object. Nomun leapt away, a convulsive movement, and fell backward into the water.

"No!" he shouted. "Get back." But the mech waded into the sea, and jabbed the weapon against his neck, before he could flounder away.

"You ordered this, Master," it said. It took his arm, helped him from the sea. He saw that the 'weapon' was a drug injector. "An

antidote, Master. For a mnemonic block."

He searched his mind and found just one new memory. It swam into focus.

FOUR DAYS AGO, BEFORE THE OTHER NOMUNS HAD BEGUN THEIR dying, he had opened his eyes to find his head gloriously empty. The blonde woman had lifted the inductor harness away and handed it to one of the men who stood near.

"Are you eased now, Nomun?" she had asked with a small smile. "Nomun; that's your name, that's all you will remember, after I give you this."

She held up an injector. "A mnemonic block. You ordered me to give it to you, before we moved you and the other Nomuns around to the terminal beach."

Nomun looked around. The men all had the same face, hard, cold, determined. His face.

"Your brothers, Nomun. Flesh of your flesh. But they do not bear your name. That's important to you." The woman no longer smiled; some unhappy emotion crossed her smooth face. "You asked me to say these things, and then make you forget them, until you emerge from your little war. If you ever do. Do you understand at all?"

"No."

"I'm not surprised," she said. "No one else understands. But listen: You've just given a hundred and thirty years of ugly memory to a biostorage device. All you have left are the skills of your body and your name." She caressed his cheek with cool fingers, smiled again, sadly. "Though not all your memories were ugly; this I know, because we've shared some sweet ones. But anyway. This is how you bear your life—you told me to say it just that way. I don't know why it can't stop there, but it can't, or so you say." She sighed. "In a little while, we'll take you to the other end of the memwort and lay you on the sand with nine of your clones. Clones who've taken the name; you've collected them over these last few years."

He had become uneasy, watching the injector. "I really don't understand at all. Wait... perhaps I'll change my mind." He tried to rise; strong hands pressed him back, though not roughly.

"No. I have your orders, Nomun. You warned me that you might suffer an attack of sanity, after the memories were gone. Were it up to me, I'd take you back to the boat, but your killmech and your brothers would not permit it. So you'll go, you'll risk your life among those animals who wear your face."

"Why? Do you know?"

She leaned forward, caressed his cheek, and then the injector hissed. "Because you're a great fool," she had said, with bitter affection, tears pooling in her eyes.

NOMUN SIGHED. YOUNG NOMUN STOOD BESIDE HIM, WATCHING the launch arrow across the water toward the beach. The pale-haired woman stood in the prow, face glowing.

"Will I live?" Young Nomun asked.

Nomun turned, looked at the smooth face, now so much older than it had been—and somehow darker. "Yes," he answered. "Yes, if you'll give up the name."

Young Nomun shrugged. "Of course. Life seems far more important to me than any name."

Nomun smiled, with an effort.

AS THEY WADED OUT TO THE LAUNCH, YOUNG NOMUN ASKED, IN A low voice, "So, will you tell me now? Are you the first Nomun?"

Just for a moment, all of Nomun's years returned, all that deadly crushing weight. Nomun stopped, knee-deep in the black ocean, and felt the sand shift under his boots.

Finally he answered. "How could I ever know?" □

IMAGINE POWERS GREAT
AND PERILS GREATER.
Places ALIVE WITH MAGIC.
PEOPLE ENLIVENED BY MYTH.



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Beneath masks and capes, but also under business suits and blue jeans...

WE ARE ALL SUPERHEROES

BY ROBERT REED

Illustration by Tom Simonton

MY BODY NEEDED OREOS, MY DISHES needed soap. Just a quick trip to the store, I promised myself. But when I walked through the big doors, I saw a wall of toilet paper, twelve rolls to the pack, and I remembered being down to my emergency sandpaper roll at

home. Not wanting to walk around with toilet paper under one arm, cookies under the other, I went back and got a cart. And these food warehouse carts are huge, in case you're stocking up for the Iditarod. Which is why I detoured over to the cash machine. An extra twenty, just in case. And that's when they must have come into the store. I didn't notice them, too busy staring at my bank balance—wishing it said something else—and that doesn't mean shit, except to say that if Charmin hadn't been on sale, I would have buzzed through the place in two minutes. I never would have seen them. And that's what living is, isn't it? People staggering around, ass-deep in coincidences.

I caught up with them in the produce department. Flex was leaning against the melon crates, and the Firestorm was picking his way through bags of old bananas. And I had no doubts. Even at a distance, I knew it was them.

I hate fruit, as a rule. But I made a trip over to the nectarines, squeezing and staring over my shoulder, watching their tattooed faces. The faces were rounder, but the tattoos hadn't changed. Her face was done up to look like muscles showing through thin skin, but in a pretty way. And her husband's face had orange and yellow streaks meant to look like fire, and the

skin around his eyes was bright black, making them seem big and dangerous, even when they stared at the bananas.

I wasn't the only person staring at my heroes.

Every other shopper was like me, nobody pointing but everyone doing everything but.

The Firestorm picked out a bag and put it into their cart. Then they strolled over to the help-yourself bins, getting rice and kidney beans, him doing the measuring and labeling while she sat on a sturdy shelf, keeping her weight off her joints. Just to look good, I got popcorn, twisting the wire tab about a thousand times. Then I followed them into the meat department. Ground turkey—ninety-eight cents a pound. A good deal any day, and I waited for the Firestorm to go first, thinking all the time that I should walk up and introduce myself. I played it out in my head. Hello, I'm so-and-so, and guess what? You'll never guess...! Except I didn't do it, and he walked away, and I got some of that turkey for myself. The top few pounds were a little warm and soft. I dug for the frozen ones, nabbing a couple. Then I kept on browsing, always staying near them, going slowly and pretending to shop.

What a coincidence, them being here.

What a chance.

I was standing at the cheese bin, deciding how much I could eat before mold came, and this woman came over, gawking at them. She had an ugly look on a face built for ugly looks. Outrage or disgust, I couldn't tell which she felt. And she pointed at them, actually pointed, asking me with this too-big voice, "What are *they* doing here?"

"Grocery shopping," I told her.

The words didn't seem to register.

So I said, "You know, she's from here. This is her hometown." I watched my words percolate into her ignorance, then added, "That's why we've got a school and a street named after her."

"What street?" the woman sputtered.

"Peabody Avenue." It was like talking to pavement. "That's her real name. Janis Peabody."

A big, wet snort, and she said, "Well, I don't care about *her*."

It was the Firestorm who pissed her off, it seemed.

And I said, "Lady, look here." In a quiet, tough way. "Here," I said, holding up a slab of plasticized cheddar. Then I did my trick with my hand. I showed her something, then growled, "I don't want to see you anymore. Understand. Stay the hell away from me."

She didn't even peep, but turning paler than chalk, she turned around and practically sprinted for the checkout lanes.

And I wished I hadn't done it.

It was stupid, and I was sorry.

And just then—in that instant—I realized that I wasn't going to introduce myself to my heroes, not even to wish them the best. All at once, I knew nothing good would come of it, and why bother them?

Why make the world more complicated than it wanted to be?

THEY GOT SKIM MILK.

I got half a gallon of 2 percent.

Why were they back in town? I kept wondering. Her mother was still alive,

but wasn't she in a nursing home back East?

Maybe not, I realized.

I remembered her mom. A tiny, almost frail woman, she always drove a new Cadillac bought by her famous daughter. One day, spotting her buying a bra in Sears, I asked my mom if I could get her autograph. I was eight or nine, and my mom turned angry. "Leave her alone," she warned me. "You don't want to be rude."

Why would that be rude? I didn't understand.

Not for years, I didn't.

Whatever the reason for this visit, I decided it was a special day worth a special treat. In the cereal aisle, I got a big box of Honeynut Os, pulling it open and dishing the Os into my mouth. One at a time. And they came past me while I was standing there. Flex was close enough to touch, those shoulders like aircraft carriers and her arms bigger than my legs. But her knees were braced and cracking with every step. Her hips were metal, and she was under strict orders not to jump anymore. In her prime, she weighed two-twenty, though she didn't look that heavy. And she could jump twenty feet straight up. And run down a cheetah. And if the car was small enough, she could yank it over her pretty tattooed face.

God, I loved Flex. I really did.

Her hair was still red, but probably dyed. And I've seen news reports about her health: how she's softening with age and the lack of exercise. How her superdense, superactive muscles have lost some of their punch. Although she could still, given a reason, bend metal bars and tear an enemy into ugly halves.

And behind her, pushing the grocery cart, was the Firestorm. Three feet from me, he stopped and held up a box of blueberry Pop-Tarts, staring at the nutrient label. He was wearing inflammable fabrics—a pale green shirt and tan chinos—and I noticed that the shirt was frayed at the collar and mended in back. And it was years out of date. And for just an instant, I could smell heat and the hint of something beginning to scorch. Then he put the box back on the shelf and walked on. The label was blackened, but not badly. I watched him, remembering when I was a kid and his biggest fan, wishing that I could grow up to be the next Firestorm.

Flex picked up a box of Raisin Bran.

I fished out another handful of sugary Os, eating them while I matched the general pace.

The Firestorm wasn't always the Firestorm. He began as Harold Abrams, a young accountant by day, a vigilante at night and on some weekends. A simple, forgettable face gave him the chance to prowl Manhattan, fighting crime where he found it. Hold-up artists found their weapons discharging into their own feet and shoulders. A mugger's shoes would catch fire, blistering his feet. And at least one fleeing automobile had its engine burst into flame, nobody noticing the nondescript fellow standing to one side, calmly smiling at the mayhem.

I wasn't born then, and I wasn't born when the police finally tracked down the vigilante. Harold Abrams was arraigned on charges of arson and assault, and about fifty lawsuits were pending, most of them brought by the injured cons. When I was old enough, my mom told me how poor Harold would have gone to prison. And I didn't believe her. If a good man hurts bad people, why should he be punished? It made no sense to me. And she halfway agreed, nodding and shrugging her shoulders before telling me what everyone older than me knew by heart.

It was the late '50s, and it was the Cold War. The suddenly famous accountant found himself pulled into the military, given an officer's pay, and living on a string of secret bases. All the charges were dropped. Platoons of scientists and retired Nazis got to test him and probe him. And with all of that fun, Harold got a code name. The Firestorm was born. A colonel named him that, hoping that Russia could be burned black; and after he was discharged, with honors, Harold Abrams had his name legally changed, his friends calling him T.H.

The experts never could explain his talent. Their best guess was that he acted like a catalyst, lowering flashpoints for anything flammable. Up close, he could detonate grenades and bullets. At half a mile, with dry air, he could coax a nuke's chemical trigger to explode—but not fast enough to make the plutonium go critical. On his best day, he could drop a slow plane at five miles, but never missiles or jets. And the Pentagon, hoping for an ultimate weapon, ended up admitting that the average grunt in the field could carry more firepower than he could.

I was born about when the Firestorm got his tattoos. Andy Warhol designed them, I've heard. And the man sure didn't look like an accountant anymore.

Crime fighter; lady's man.

Older kids used to tell me about the starlets that the Firestorm dated. Angie Dickinson. Ginger from *Gilligan's Island*. Jane Fonda and Joan Collins. He's the reason water beds became popular, they claimed. Because T. H. had a habit of losing control in bed, in the middle of things. Everyone knew he put Joan Collins into the hospital, burning the hair around the you-know-what; although years later, reading his biographies, I didn't find any mention of accidents. And in her book, Joan Collins claimed he wasn't even much of a lover, all things considered.

The Firestorm was an official, badge-carrying member of the NYPD. He rode in parades, appeared on television, and when they needed him, he helped the police with hostage situations and the occasional sniper.

Janis Peabody was a local girl, twenty and tired of hiding her talents. She sent the Firestorm a long letter, plus pictures showing her lifting her family's Ford Fairlane overhead. He flew out here to meet her. They went on a date in the Fairlane, then flew back to New York together. When it got out that they were living together, people got pissed. And when they got married there was a lot of grumbling about his Jewish name. Even my folks didn't approve, although they usually dressed up their feelings with pity for their future children.

As it happened, they couldn't have kids. Muscle and eggs don't mix.

Janis was named Flex by one of the tabloids, and I don't think they meant it in the nicest way.

She went to work with him. The SWAT team built a suit for her, using tank armor and fancy spring-soled shoes. Clomp-clomp-clomp. I'd see her on the news, leading the cops into a firefight, and I had my first daydreams about sleeping with women. Because of Flex—in part—my first girlfriend was stocky, a shotputter on the high school team; and if she wasn't as strong as Flex, at least it was night and I could see what I wanted to see.

Those were their best years, I'd think.

They were superheroes, genuine and genuinely loved. Who cared if the Firestorm had supported Nixon and the war? Who cared if Flex's body armor caused ricochets, killing a cop and two hostages during one assault? The fact was that they were decent people trying to do good. The public couldn't find fault with them, and it didn't hurt that *Life* did about a dozen pictorials showing them at work, at home and at play.

Being them left a lot of free time, as it happened.

With a ghost writer, Flex wrote her autobiography, then played herself in the very bad movie.

The Firestorm hit the lecture circuit, hinting at political ambitions.

Together they wrote a self-help guide: *We're All Superheroes*. Twenty million copies in print, according to my old copy. And seeing them in the grocery store, loading up on the cheapest cat food, it occurred to me that they'd been right in a way nobody could have seen coming. In an ass-backwards way, if you know what I mean.

It was Iran that ended the good years. The hostages were taken, and who was better suited to help bring them out of Tehran? For weeks, the Firestorm was on the news, pleading for the chance to help. He made such a stink and pulled in so many favors that the Pentagon had no choice, like it or not. But old accountants make bad soldiers, and the poor fellow's back went out on him during the mildest of boot camps. He was left in bed, in traction, while his wife put on a show for their fellow soldiers. Her joints ached at the end of the day; she was eating aspirin by the handful. But she was the ultimate soldier, and loved, and there were rumors that Flex took advantage of her sudden desirability.

The Firestorm heard the rumors, or he made his own guesses.

His back recovered in time for the mission, and while riding into Iran in the belly of a helicopter, he warned the others that he'd personally incinerate her boyfriends' dicks.

Tensions were high, and not just because of the mission.

Then came that mess in the desert. A collision, an explosion. Brave soldiers died, and the survivors slipped away. Some people blamed the Firestorm, even when he was vindicated by every official inquiry. How could a man so good with fire not be able to avoid it? they reasoned. And those juvenile threats had to have played some role, wouldn't they?

Fair or not, the dead were tied to them.

And then their marriage, blissful for so many years, turned ugly in a public way. There were fights, open affairs, and trial separations. One violent New Years brawl left their penthouse apartment in ruins. Afterward the one-time accountant announced that he was now a one-man crime fighting unit. Though for the most part, the famous scorchline wasn't ringing, the police tired of sharing the successes and risks with the likes of him.

Sometimes one of them appeared on a talk show. Carson had the Firestorm. Letterman seemed to like Flex. Both were perfect standby celebrities, capable of doing tricks and making clever conversation, a decade and a half of Manhattan cocktail parties put to good use.

There was talk about a dark, tell-all movie about the Firestorm.

Eastwood backed out. Cruise wanted too much. Then it was Mickey Rourke, and there was trouble on the set, and the project was aborted before it was half-finished. Which was probably just as well.

Flex got commercial work, selling exercise equipment until her hip snapped in the midst of filming.

The Firestorm sold First Alert smoke detectors, and I'd watch him, feeling sick to my stomach the whole time.

Then came the accidental fires.

The first accident scorched a hotel room and a hooker.

Looking back, it's a wonder that fire departments let that man wander the streets alone. I mean, think about it. There's a power that can't be explained, and why assume that its owner will always have control over it?

The second accident burned his Long Island mansion to rubble.

A Fourth of July fireworks display went off prematurely, sinking a barge near the Statue of Liberty.

The Firestorm was nearby when butane lighters detonated. "Coin-

cidence," said his newest publicist. "Nothing but."

Then one evening he strolled into his favorite liquor store, found a robbery in progress, and two seconds later, gallons of Russian vodka exploded like gasoline, nobody killed but half a city block reduced to ashes.

The poor old guy was losing it, and he couldn't accept it. He was vacationing out West in '88, in the early summer, and Yellowstone Park was having trouble with fires. Thinking the accidents were flukes, he volunteered to make some quick, surgical backfires. The head ranger agreed, apparently too long in the woods and unaware of the risks. The first results were promising. But then the Firestorm got tired, or greedy, and there was something akin to a power surge. Flashpoints were lowered for miles. It was a thousand times worse than the liquor store. Fires sprinkled the dry mountains. Park officials couldn't find all of them, much less fight them. And before the tourists could be evacuated, those little fires had grown and merged, becoming one mighty and brutal godawful blaze.

A couple hundred vacationers died inside their campers and cars.

Nearly fifty smoke jumpers and rangers were cooked, heroes all.

I watched it on television, every minute of it. And before the Park quit smoking, the old accountant/crime fighter had announced his retirement. There was talk about suicide attempts. There were lawsuits and court orders for him to stop using his powers. Yet somewhere in all that chaos, he found a chance to slip away and visit his estranged wife, camping at her back door until she relented, allowing him to sleep on her sofa.

By then, Flex was living in attempted obscurity.

She didn't attend the trials, but she released positive words about her husband's good intentions and long public service.

In the same vein, *USA Today* ran a front page article about their mutual records, tallying the people they'd saved versus the Yellowstone dead—in a colorful bar graph—and showing that more people had been helped than harmed. By a long, long ways.

And yet.

We couldn't forget the burning pines and all those body bags laid out in half-neat rows. Even I think of the body bags and the mothers crying at all the funerals. And believe me, I want nothing but the best for them.

I'm on their side.

OUR PATHS KEPT CROSSING IN THE STORE, and I kept tabs on what they were buying. Nothing fancy, nothing odd. Judging by their cart, they could have been anyone.

I found myself hoping for eye contact, just a moment's worth, but both of them seemed pretty slick at avoiding people's gazes.

We were in the soft drink aisle at one point, and I heard talking. Laughing. Then this kid came strolling past me. Thirteen, maybe. And cocky. He had a big goofy grin on his face, and he was holding a can of chicken noodle soup. He walked right up to the Firestorm, handing him the can, and said, "Heat it up for me, old man."

Then added: "And don't burn down the place, would ya'?"

Nothing showed in the tattooed face, but there must have been a kick of emotion. Because there was a sizzling sound and the red-and-white label caught fire, and the Firestorm dropped the can with a big *thud*, then whipped a rag from his back pocket and neatly snuffed out the flames.

He was quick with that rag.

Natural.

The idiot kid turned and ran past me, laughing. A couple of other idiots were at the end of the aisle, enjoying the show. But I barely noticed them, my eyes fixed on that old couple, trying as hard as I could to read their hidden faces.

Trying to understand.

Continued on page 102

Charles Thomas has spent his entire life wishing he could somehow be different.
Thanks to Twill, the alien lawyer, he's about to get his chance.

IDIOSYNCRASIES

BY MARK RICH

Illustrated by Michael Dubisch

Not knowing exactly how to describe the place, or the people, I settle on this:

A woman of uncertain height, with a grayish complexion and an aura of inventive mischief about her like a halo of static-heightened hair, wearing nothing much other than the standard stripe of frayed cords from one trembling shoulder to the region of her third knee, sits on an oval stool before a man dressed in glinty fabric to which the portraits of his foremothers are pinned in orderly fashion. You might think him an elevated personage in this place. He

holds little rank however. This fact in itself makes her listen to his words and weigh them carefully. For practical purposes I will refer to her as Twill and him as Magrood.

Twill plays a large part here; Magrood, though his words have great effect, appears only a little while into the narrative. Because of his words, however, we cannot dispose of him entirely. Two other characters, Charles T. and Eleanor A. Thomas, to be introduced shortly, will figure largely in what is to transpire. Two additional characters, Ned Burger and Betty Blaine, will appear farther down the road. Their roles in the present story, however,



are so nearly inconsequential, we will forget about them till their time arrives.

In the meantime I am concerned you catch this conversation between Twill and Magrood. For all practical purposes, our story begins here:

"I think you know why I'm here," Twill says.

"Yes," says Magrood. "And I'm sorry to see this happening. I'd rather you continued studying and working under me. You'd have made a good person of laws yourself."

"All that humility, though, Magrood. I don't think it would be good for me. It doesn't suit. I'm too enamored of the flash and fanfare end of things."

"I suppose that makes Earth a good choice. Not that I'm saying I approve."

"You don't have to approve, Uncle," she says.

I have failed to mention before this point that he may be her uncle. I feel uncertain of the actual relationship, however, since we are speaking of another world, with other practices and mores and family structures.

"In fact," she continues, "I'd be surprised if you did approve. I just want you to help me with something."

"You know I can't, Twill. What's law is law. It's what we're sworn to protect."

"What *you're* sworn to protect. I'm giving it all up."

"That's apparent enough."

"I just know there must be some side route around the difficulty. If I want to trade, why can't I just trade?"

"Consent of the other is absolutely necessary."

"Don't be such a brute, Uncle."

"I'm not, Daughter," he says.

I refuse to take responsibility, as author, for the fact that "daughter" here and "uncle" earlier fail to conjoin somehow. We are dealing with a people unlike ourselves in many respects; and I, being only human, have no way to know if "daughter" or "uncle" is correct, or if both are.

"And I can't give any rousing speeches, I suppose, to gain that consent," Twill says.

"Of course not. You know that. You must obtain consent, yes. That is number one. But, number two, you must not show yourself. You cannot coerce trickily, number three. You've been my student long enough to know what I mean by doing a thing trickily. It goes against the grain of our profession."

"Your profession, Uncle."

"I think, Daughter, you retain more of the profession than you realize. One day you'll accept your lowly place in society and reduce yourself to bearing the weight of truth and right."

"Never," she says.

"Setting your mind so firmly—that too is a trait that gives you away," Magrood says. "Well, since you're set on your course—may I then wish you luck?"

"I thought you didn't believe in luck."

"I don't," he says, "but why should that get in the way of my wishing it might be otherwise?"

She sighs in wild happiness. "You really do love me, don't you, Uncle?"

At which point he utters something so untranslatable I banish it from these pages, lest I set readers off their oats when the story has just begun.

A MOMENT AGO EARTH WOULD HAVE BEEN A FAR-AWAY AND HARD-TO-REACH place, since we were in the company of such beings as Twill and Magrood. Fortunately for the rest of us, it handily exists accessibly nearby. In fact, we can hardly avoid it. The beings here live lives much like we know, since we live them ourselves, which gives me a little respite in the explain-as-we-go department.

Charles T. Thomas enters for breakfast, wearing a tidy gray suit. Of medium height, moderately overweight, and of middling baldness, he cuts a middle-of-the-road figure for a person of the legal profession, which suits him relatively well. "Good morning," he says to Eleanor, his wife of seven years.

She looks up with a smile and a turn of her thin face. Her blond hair looks unusually full this morning. She has arranged an appealing breakfast, it being her turn this morning.

"Good morning, darling," Eleanor says. "Any more of your bright dreams?"

A puzzled expression falls across his face, then falls off completely as he sits down to his grapefruit and bagel. "Odd thing, isn't it, that these dreams come over me so often this way, recently?"

"Ah," she says. "So you did have one."

"I did. It's very strange," he says, nodding thoughtfully. He works methodically at his grapefruit. "You remember how I always used to say—"

"I know what you're going to say," she says.

"How I used to say," he continues, "that I'm always jealous of people who can be truly idiosyncratic, even to the point of being strange?"

"I promised to love your idiosyncrasies," she says, toying with her dry bagel. "My father was idiosyncratic. But you remember. And you haven't offered any idiosyncrasies for me to appreciate and grow to love, anyway, Charlie."

"I always figure something will start them in me."

"What? Something must start them? They don't just arise of their own accord? I figured they would."

"I suppose idiosyncrasies can develop through life—though I think more often something galvanizes them into being. Some telling incident. Something exciting or strange. It triggers them."

"In our lives nothing's likely to be exciting or strange," she says, with the barest trace of wistfulness.

"I suppose not," he says.

"Tell me about the dream."

"Ah, yes." He smiles. "Another one very much the same. An exotic locale. I absolutely love it. Thrilling colors and a sky very oddly colored, like you'd see on paper if a child went crazy with oil-crayons—it's stark and magisterial and mysterious at the same time, with purple fronds of a fern or something brushing nearby, and chattering things that look like lizards with hyperthyroidism. I don't suppose they were but that's how they looked. A little fat, if I can say so. But—I don't know how to express it—I just loved it."

"Must be that old hunger of yours."

"Yes," he says.

"Most men hunger for a strange woman."

Charles T. Thomas winks both eyes at that. "I suppose it might be a similar thing. I've grown complacent in the arms of Mother Earth."

"Oh, and you think this place is other than Mother Earth?"

"How could it be any place here?"

"But how could you *love* it, Charley? You say you do. I don't think it's possible to be a creature of this place and love someplace that doesn't exist, or exists outside our experience. How can we love the surface of the Moon? It's a gray and craggy place and there's nothing about it to love."

"But this place has hyperthyroidal lizards."

"But you can't love them."

"Why not?"

She tosses her head with a look of doubt. "I don't know, really. I just think you can't. But maybe that can be your idiosyncrasy."

"You sound disappointed."

"I suppose I regard idiosyncrasy as a mark of inner greatness, but I suppose if you have just a minor little idiosyncrasy, you must be destined for mediocrity."

He shrugs with good nature. "I never promised to be great, my dear."

"No, you didn't. You merely hinted at some future strangeness. You thought you were destined for strangeness."

"And I hooked you on that, did I?" He grins. "Well, the future does still remain to us, doesn't it?"

"That it does," she says, returning her attention to her bagel.

This morning as he often does, Charlie Thomas walks to the law office via Horvath Park, a rolling affair with sidewalks, a few playgrounds, a cluster of trees here and sporadic ones elsewhere, and a measure of sunshine today.

A child rolls down one inclined sidewalk on a trike festooned with

blue and yellow streamers.

"Hello," Charles says to the child, supposing it to be more idiosyncratic to talk with children in this society than to ignore them. "What's this we have, a racing car?"

The wide-eyed child gazes up, as if upon a benevolent but wild animal. "No," the child says. "Spaceship."

"A spaceship? I suppose you're going to the Moon."

"Nother planet," says the kid.

"Jupiter? Or Mars, I bet."

"Too near," the kid says.

"Farther, eh? Must be quite a spaceship."

"Space warps," says the kid.

"Ah," says Charles, laughing. "I understand you completely. You know I'm just like you. I'd like to go somewhere millions of light years away."

"Why don't you?" says the kid.

"Can't. Life's too busy and complicated and spaceships just can't go very far. I suppose if I earn enough money, then off to the Moon I go. Not much farther, though."

"I'm going farther."

"I'm sure you are. You tell me how."

"I don't talk to strangers."

Charles laughs. "I do, though. I'm making a practice of it. My wife doesn't think I'm strange enough, in fact. So it looks like I must make a practice of being a stranger to everyone. And as I think about it, I think that will suit me fine."

"I'm an alien too," the kid says, without cracking a smile, his eyes still large.

"Heh," says Charles. "That makes two of us, does it? You know, what I worry about—I say this confidentially, alien to alien—is that if I get the chance to take off somewhere *really* strange, I'll take it. I'll go. And what does that mean? Does that mean I love the strange more than I love Eleanor? Or what?"

"You're silly," says the boy.

Charles frowns and lifts his eyebrows. Then smiles. "I guess I am," he says, resuming his way to the office.

I LIED TO YOU EARLIER ABOUT THE NON-REAPPEARANCE OF MAGROOD, who appears again after all. To lie to you, however, consists of the ordinary, it being my responsibility as author to lie to you often and well. It astonishes me, however, that I lied to myself as well, a dubious achievement in a universe confined to paper: the one who sees all, the know-it-all narrator, should reign with a steel glove. Nevertheless Magrood slips from between my clumsy fingers to say:

"I understand you are not Twill."

Charles T. Thomas, embedded in a body over whose operation she still lacks complete control, nods, not knowing if a nod is more appropriate than, say, sticking out her tongue. She at least has progressed to the point of regarding herself in the feminine. "I'm Charles," she says.

"Ah," says Magrood. "Am I to understand, then, that you are here under your own consent?"

"I could hardly wait," says Charles.

"You were not tempted by—ah, wait, here I've found what I thought I'd lost: Twill's report on you. I see you are familiar with the delicate points of law, as understood in your own society."

"Should I admit to the indelicate points as well?"

"But you understand how she could not execute this exchange with you without your fully unforced, uncoerced consent?"

"Of course. In fact I begged her."

"She wasn't allowed to make herself known to you," says Magrood, leaning forward. "That should have covered all possibilities."

"She never showed herself," says Charles. "I—I simply imagined

"You know, what I worry about—I say this confidentially, alien to alien—is that if I get the chance to take off somewhere *really* strange, I'll take it. I'll go. Does that mean I love the strange more than I love Eleanor? Or what?"

she existed, and—I don't know if you call it this, but I did something along the lines of *praying* for her existence. In short I asked her to exist, because I wanted someone exactly like her—and then there she was! I still don't know if I created her out of thin air or not, for as far as I know, she never existed before I *asked* for someone like her to exist. But she appeared when I cried out for someone like her."

"How did you think to ask?"

"I dreamed of a strange place—remarkably like this one, in fact. Look at that fat lizard over there! But about that dream. You suppose it was planted in me? I don't care, really. I'm enthralled to be here. Wholly overcome. Blipped. Mad. With joy, that is. You're a handsome man, Uncle. May I call you uncle? Twill said—"

Magrood brushed aside the comment. "We will deal with familiarities later, Daughter. In the meantime, what are we to do? I'm tempted to order a reversal of this exchange—"

"Not without my consent, you don't," says Charles.

"Ah," says Magrood, fingering a pasty cheek.

"If you *want* to be here I can do nothing."

"I do have a question," Charles says.

"And what would that be?"

"I'd like a teacher, one here on this world," Charles says, "someone who could teach me about the delicacies and fine points to be encountered *here*—"

The face of Magrood lights up. In a burst of affection and deep-seated enthusiasm and approval and hope he says—well, what follows on his end of the conversation I again hesitate to set down here, just as Charles hesitates to comprehend its full import. After all, it is a different world than this one.

"*DEAR UNCLE,*" HIS DAUGHTER WRITES FROM EARTH, "*WHAT YOU SAID is true. You saw me true to the bone.*"

— But no, wait, you are seeing this too soon. First:

WHEN SHE LOOKS UP FROM BREAKFAST, SHE HAVING COMMENCED already, it being her morning to do so and Charles' morning to be a few seconds late, she smiles faintly, and then drops the smile out of consideration for whatever emotional state her husband has found himself in this morning.

"Good morning," he says, taking himself to the breakfast table and eyeing the grapefruit.

"You're looking chipper this morning," she says.

"Am I really?" says Twill, who is beginning to think of himself in the masculine. "Am I early? Am I late?"

"You're right on time."

"Incredible."

"And on top of that—"

"Yes?" says Twill.

"Oh, nothing."

"No, really, tell me."

"You're looking very nice," says Eleanor. "Your tie isn't a perfect match for that suit, but—well, I know you sometimes run a little askew by middle of the week. But the soap dish—"

"You like it?"

Eleanor nearly arches an eyebrow and comments that a soap dish belongs elsewhere than on her husband's head, even if the soap dish does resemble an albino scallop, and even if it does nearly cover the bald spot. He has made certain it will not slip by clever use of some hair pins.

Continued on page 104

At a Grand Triple Union wedding ceremony, it isn't always easy to tell the difference between the appetizers and the guests.

TRIZARK

BY DANA WILLIAM PAXSON

Illustration by Bob Eggleton

A GANG OF SCREAMING BRATS IN THREE species raced past the potted shrubs, brandishing flaying knives and lugging the corpse of a recently killed tree-gopher. Surveying the pre-ceremony party from what he hoped was an inconspicuous corner, the gorgon shuddered. Here he was, Nedrillo the farmer, confronting a Grand Triple Union wedding ceremony for the first time. A Grand Shambles. He wanted to go home. Why hadn't his son eloped? And why had Krellfard's wife asked Grai Sseerrindar to solemnize the marriage? Sseerrindar, pompous and fastidious, a gator-shaman of the Greater Snake Clan, hated this





kind of wedding: human bride and gorgon groom.

The punch bowls seethed with breeding grillot fish. The Krendiss, who had shrugged everyone else aside, were sticking their crocodilian snouts in and sucking up fish eggs from the high-octane mix while they hooted at each other and tried to stamp on the servers' feet. Vessin Krellfard, the human and drunken father of the bride, shook his bushy mane of gray hair and puffed an exasperated and fermented gust that shriveled Sseerrindar's corsage into a small brown knot.

Brandishing a stiff leather bag, Krellfard took a deep breath and shouted into the air, "Nedrillo! Nedrillo Goodrin! Where are you? Gorgon toad! Do you call this a dowry? Norkis! Get me my challenge gear!" He took three short steps in three very different directions. To steady him, Sseerrindar clutched him by the collar—an unsound idea, since the collar was the only fastening for his ceremonial suit—and with a fourth step, Krellfard stripped himself naked. Peering from behind a tree trunk, Nedrillo covered his huge eyes and ground his teeth.

Obviously embarrassed, Sseerrindar dropped the collar and ducked quickly behind Krellfard's sons Jervin and Twivill, vanishing in the mixed throng of humans, crocodilians and gorgons. The Long Crocodile Clan people howled with laughter at Vessin, who tried to squeeze between a pair of Chattering Owl Clan gorgons and get away. Jervin and Twivill grabbed the suit and rushed up behind Vessin, covering his ample and hairy backside. As the gorgons stepped back, Vessin lost his balance and fell face down. His sons landed on top of him.

"Honor for the Dancing Turtle Clan! Showing us your best face, Vessin?" Drimbelard the Krendiss took a moment from siphoning punch to mock Vessin's mishap. His brethren hooted, spewing punch in all directions. Hot-tempered Jervin leaped to his feet, fumbling for the krisblade at his waist.

"Pigsnakes!" he shouted. "Par-

asites! Spawn of Claribel! May the worms eat you as you eat our food!" All the Krendiss jerked erect at this. Silence fell like poison.

Nedrillo cringed. The eldest of the Cottonmouth gorgons, he had scraped together what he thought was appropriate by clan law for the dowry: thirty-one fingers of tellite. His son Grisbane, the groom, had thrown in four more of his own. Now this shame, this insult from Krellfard he didn't dare return. *The whole wedding is ruined! If I were Krendiss, like Drimbelard or Wrybane or...he felt a touch on his elbow and heard a hiss.*

"Do sssomething! They're waiting for you. Challenge their dowry rights!" It was Sseerrindar. "This is all ceremony! Haven't you ever done one of these before?"

"No! I've never even been to one!" Nedrillo hissed back. "The Krendiss are going to..."

"Never mind them! Come on! Inssult him! Gather your offssspring!"

Nedrillo gulped and took a breath. Raising a long finger, he bawled as loudly as he could, "Jervin, the only worms here are in your father's food! I, Nedrillo, laugh at your father's claim!" It cut the silence like a blade. The Krendiss brayed with laughter. Vessin, who had gotten his suit hitched again, drew himself up and stiffened. Jervin and Twivill stood behind his shoulders. "To me, my children!" called Nedrillo; and sons Grisbane, Felltwine and Meltbrew, and daughters Brevelik and Darjann, gathered behind him.

The Krendiss began a steady bass hooting in a slow cadence. Crocodilians, gorgons and humans formed into concentric circles, propelling Vessin and Nedrillo into the center. Sseerrindar held each one by an arm. Pelliannas, the bride-to-be, stood behind her father with her brothers. The women elders swayed in the far outer circle, wearing dark blue veils as heavy as shrouds. Norkis pushed forward, clapping around Vessin's shoulders a metallic cape with razor edges. Nedrillo felt a similar cape being tossed about him.

Vessin threw down the dowry bag. "Gorgon scum!" he began, clattering his cape. A cheer rose from the Dancing Turtle folk.

Grand Triple Union Wedding Program

Leader of the Feast:	Drimbelard Goldscaler, CC
Welcome:	Grai Sseerrindar, G.S., GSC
Opening Social:	Catered by: MunchRodents, Ltd
Exchange of Insults:	Vessin Krellfard, DTuC Nedrillo Goodrin, CC Wedding Guests, All Clans
Exchange of Vows:	Pelliannas Krellfard, ROC Grisbane Goodrin, DTeC Grai Sseerrindar, G.S., GSC, presiding
The Warming:	Catered by: MindsEnd Spirits AG
Exchange of Seed:	Drelendine Goodrin, COC Wringlip Krellfard, LCC Women Elders, All Clans
Ceremonial music:	By Tubular Sprocket
Dance music:	By Tubular Sprocket and, the Dire Granke Ennliffe Turelgasp, hypersoprano
Feast:	Drimbelard Goldscaler, CC Nedrillo Goodrin, CC Wedding Guests, All Clans
Catered by:	Pigdeer Express, MindsEnd Spirits AG, KrendCooks & Co.
Fire Management:	Dancing Turtle Exempt Volunteers
Facilities:	Heavenly Hearot Halls, Inc
Wedding Hunt:	GunSwamper Bros

Members of the Wedding Party

by clan, name and species:

Chattering Owl Clan:	Drelendine (human) Weregrand (crocodilian)
Cottonmouth Clan:	Drimbelard (crocodilian) Engreballe (crocodilian) Nedrillo (gorgon) Wardfurrow (human)
Dancing Turtle Clan:	Fiddlebarth (crocodilian) Vessin (human)
Dry Terrapin Clan:	Brevelik (gorgon) Grisbane (gorgon)
Enveloping Squirrel Clan:	Darjann (gorgon)
Greater Snake Clan:	Sseerrindar (human) Felltwine (gorgon)
Long Crocodile Clan:	Wringlip (gorgon) Meltbrew (gorgon) Wrybane (crocodilian)
Ranting Ox Clan:	Pelliannas (human)
Sweating Salamander Clan:	Jervin (human) Twivill (gorgon) Fargomast (gorgon)

"Human nippletwister!" Nedrillo felt his blood come up. The Chattering Owl gorgons gave a rasping yell.

"Flatnose facelicker!" Cries of "Hey, hey!" from the humans.

"Hairbag!" Some applause and a whistle. Vessin looked annoyed.

"Eater of claws!" A general roar.

"Sharer of lice!" Much laughing. Nedrillo's heavy locks twined and writhed as he began to enjoy Vessin's increasingly offended look.

"Fondler of rodents!" Cheers built between insults until the Krendiss Drimbeld and Weregrand leaped forward and thrust bride and groom together with their scaly claws. Standing over the dowry bag, Grisbane seized it and handed it to Pelliannas, who stuffed it between her ample breasts and grinned. Everyone shouted, "Yaya ho!" Weregrand picked up Grai Sseerrindar by his topknot and sat him in the largest punch bowl, among the grillot fish, from which place he was ordered to conduct the exchange of vows.

WHEN THE NEW COUPLE HAD BEEN LIFTED TO THE SHOULDERS OF THEIR kin, the first ceremony was done. Vessin stalked off without a word. As Nedrillo watched him knock over a smoking rack of vole flambé, he heard, "Don't worry. Let's get some food." His tricousin Fargomast, half Nedrillo's weight but always the first to the feast, took Nedrillo by the elbow and dragged him off to the food tables, where

CARRYING RACKS OF ENGRAVED
*vacuum flasks filled with hot
semen, the mothers gathered in
the domed chamber with other
female family members and a
small group of quaking Treffnilian musicians.*

they passed some time chasing and eating the squealing appetizers, drinking Bent Leg with its assortment of molds and terpenes, and swapping nauseating stories about the Snake Clan and their obsessive hygiene. Vessin came up, glaring; Fargomast took Nedrillo's elbow and turned him away.

"Lice—that's pretty low, Snakehair," Vessin spat. "You shamed me in the ceremony."

"But I thought I was supposed to..." Nedrillo turned.

Fargomast stepped between them, his back to Vessin. "Later," he said loudly, "Come on, let's see how the women are doing." He led Nedrillo to a huge pair of gilded doors. They pulled one door open a crack and peered in. "Shush," Fargomast ordered.

Clad now in flowing robes and steelthread veils, carrying racks of engraved vacuum flasks filled with hot semen, the mothers gathered in the domed chamber with other female family members and a small group of quaking Treffnilian musicians. "Begin the Theme of Negotiation," commanded Dreieindine, the mother of Grisbane, raising her considerable nose in the air. The band hroomed and blooted slowly as Dreieindine and Wringlip, the mother of Pelliannas, set out the flasks on a large elevated circular steel table marked with polygonal zones and slithering lines, all inlaid in pale-green torpest stone, grimed with soot at the edges. The table squatted on a pyre of aromatic wood. Around the table, four Krendiss women waited, their long snouts protruding from under the heavy veils.

Dreieindine and Wringlip linked arms. The band gave a fortissimo grunt, then stopped. With a howl, the remaining women stripped the veils from their faces, cast burning embers in the pyre's wood, and scrambled to the table's edge. From the table the two mothers seized counters dealt them by the Krendiss and began to turn them up one by one. As the first counter turned, the first flames licked at the outer edges of the pyre.

"Four, for the Dry Terrapin folk on Outer Green!" cried Dreieindine. She shoved two flasks forward along parallel twisted paths. Her sister Wellerfarr handed her more counters.

"Seven, for the Enveloping Squirrel people on the Bakery," answered Wringlip. She seized the two flasks and deployed three of her own, scowling over her shoulder at the band. "Play the hartembar, you little slugs!" she shouted. Horrifying glissandos began to slither upward with the sparks, punctuated with fwomps and virtuoso sazzles.

"What's going on?" Nedrillo whispered, peering through the slightly open door.

Fargomast, his head below Nedrillo's, answered softly, "It's the Gene Game. They're swapping refined seed. Didn't they do this at your wedding?"

"We eloped. Dreieindine's parents were traditional enough, but...you know, my father was a strict Thellvoil. Sex and reproduction absolutely bound together—no semen exchanges, no cross-species children, and no weddings like this one." Nedrillo's locks twisted in embarrassment.

"But Dreierding, I mean, Dreieindine, your wife, whatever, never talked to you about this ceremony?"

"She says I don't communicate well." Nedrillo looked up furtively to see whether Dreieindine was watching him.

"You are indeed a sap. But she deserves you." Fargomast reached up and slapped Nedrillo's shoulder.

"Now wait..." Nedrillo began.

"Four and seven, seven and four," shouted the women. More wood began to catch fire. Smoke the color of rust rose to the ceiling, and an alarm began blating; the musicians shifted smoothly into its rhythm.

"Good nights and shrieking!" Nedrillo said, recoiling.

Fargomast pulled him back. "Wait," he said, "They're winding it up."

"Eleven and twelve, for the Ranting Ox Clan on Remembery," called Dreieindine. She

grabbed Wringlip's flasks. One percussionist's tambilash caught fire. The third chorus of the hartembar died with a wheeze as the musicians scrambled for the door, gnorhorns, flantreeks, trilintarbs and fairbines clattering as their bearers struggled to be the first out. Curses punctuated the final negotiations. Squeezed behind a door, Fargomast and Nedrillo fought to hold their places and peer in. Feeling an elbow in his thin ribs, Nedrillo looked around and into Vessin's dark-jawed face. Without a word, Vessin shoved past him to look through the door crack at the smoke-muffled room.

"Twelve and one, for the Sweating Salamander group on Fritchwater," called Wringlip in her turn, snatching Dreieindine's shining flasks. A troop of firefighters raced in the door, to be intercepted by the other women and thrown out again. The smoke thickened and more alarms harangued. The flames licked at the hangings and the ceiling. Flasks and counters flew from hand to hand in a blinding dazzle of silver.

"Four and seven, twelve and eleven," the women shouted. Dreieindine and Wringlip tossed the counters into the fire and leaped away just as the pyre began to shift. Dreieindine's articulated wooden neckpiece clattered against her imposing bosom; she ripped it off and threw it in the flames, where it burst into particolored fingers of heat. Heads held high, swatting out sparks and small embers in their robes, the women paraded from the room to the main hall with their flasks, letting the firefighters charge in at last and begin their work. Passing the doors on their way out, Dreieindine said to Wringlip, "I just hope that know-nothing husband of mine hasn't stuck his fardoon in his mouth again."

"Don't worry," Wringlip answered. "I'm sure Vessin will keep him good company." The wives smirked at each other and went to inhale some esters. The husbands, offended, glared at their departing spouses from behind the door, and then at each other. Fargomast snickered.

"Now for some real drinking," Vessin snorted, with a scowl.

"I'll match you," Nedrillo said, glaring back, "And then you'll see what a Gorgon can hold."

A LONG THOOM FROM THE GNORHORNS SIGNALLED THE START OF THE feast. Vessin and Nedrillo picked their faces up from a puddle of Bent Leg and hauled themselves nearly upright.

Vessin peered aslant into Nedrillo's face. "Time to eat, old man. You hungry? Your eyes are...huge."

Nedrillo watched the ballroom rotate inexorably to his left. "Of course, my friend. Where's the food?" They both looked around them into a throng of dancers, drinkers, shouters and singers, all vigorously exercising their specialties at high speed while moving toward the door to the feasting hall. Fargomast had disappeared. Trying as hard as he knew how, Nedrillo could not make his feet follow a consistent direction of movement. He lost track of Vessin; then the doorway he was pursuing ducked behind three gorgon women in tall headgear and escaped.

At last Meltbrew and Grisbane took his arms. "This way, Father." He stared at them. Meltbrew's ears, unnaturally lengthened into dark tubes, fought with his serpentine locks for airspace. Grisbane's eyes were rotating in time with the room.

"Stop that," Nedrillo said. He clutched at his tongue, which he felt

that Vessin's suit was slipping again.

Pelliannas and Grisbane scrambled onstage. The band cranked into an up-tempo brewback. With Weregrand and Fiddlebarth the Krendiss flanking them and joining in with reedy echoes, the bridal couple sang,

Gorgon groom, human bride,
Krendiss offering their pride,
Will our first be she or he,
Snakelocked, scaled, or hairy be?
Now we cheer the wedding beast!
Questions answered after feast!

AND THEN THEY JUMPED DOWN, LEADING THE DANCERS' CHARGE TO long tables loaded to the edges with food.

Nedrillo sat between his clanbrothers Engrebaile the Krendiss and Wardfurrow the Human, neither of whom had he met before the wedding. Waving a cutlet from his haunch of pigdeer, he whispered to Wardfurrow, "Wedding beast? That's what I'm eating?"

Wardfurrow shook his head and rasped through a prodigious mustache, "Grisbane is your oldest, right?"

"Right."

"And you've never been to one of these, either?"

"True."

"Did you just arrive on this planet from Outer Green?"

"No! I live over the mountains by Scramsburg, about a day's ride out."

"The same thing. Well, I'm glad everyone else in your family seems to know how this works." Wardfurrow grabbed Nedrillo by the cravat and pulled him closer. Waving a partly gnawed dinner bone at Nedrillo's nose, he muttered, "Some things are best not discussed outside the ceremonies." He glanced toward Engrebaile. "Feelings are important. You should have asked your wife, except she's a Chattering Owl and you're Cottonmouth. That would stop me too. You poor

snakebrain." He shook his head, released Nedrillo, and went back to vigorous gnawing.

"What things?"

"You'll see," said Wardfurrow through his mouthful, "Just keep a good appetite for the main course. Drink lots of trizark. And by next time I hope you'll have spent more time drinking with your clanbrothers." He ran a greasy hand through his luxuriant head of hair and wagged a finger at Nedrillo, "And less time up to your skinny backside in your fields playing with your fardoon."

As Wardfurrow turned back to his eating, Nedrillo stared gloomily at the fuming goblet of red trizark in front of him. A pseudopod rose briefly from its surface, then dissolved. He offered some to his tresses first. His forelocks and sidecurls sucked greedily, then he drained the goblet and asked for more. "Eggs of the Saurians," he said to himself. Engrebaile looked at him sharply, but said nothing. "I envy Drimbeld," Nedrillo said under his breath. "He seems to know what to do everywhere. Waiter," he raised his voice over the rising babble, "I wanted more trizark!"

"Yesss, sssire," came a whistling voice. "It'sss heere." A very young Krendiss dressed in pale caftan livery, still not versatile in vocalization, quickly filled the goblet again and grinned at him. "Enjooyo the ssspecial wedwedwedding cuuiiisssine, Faaaather Goooorgon." He turned and vanished, hooting at some private crocodilian joke.

Nedrillo ignored the hissing coming from his topcurls begging for a sip, and downed his drink.

The music halted with a crash. Silence, then the flantreeks began an ominous skirling. Gnorhorns wooped. The trilintarbs brayed triumphantly, and the doors to the kitchen flew open. A huge wheeled cart, decorated with flowers, fruits and vegetables arranged and carved in erotic animated shapes, emerged, with four gorgon cooks riding it, one at each corner. As their snaky coiffures alternately

TO NEDRILLO IT FELT LIKE AN enema delivered through his ear. He kept trying to breathe, but whatever he inhaled seemed to exit through every pore of his body just as fast as he gasped for breath.

unreeling from his mouth.

"Stop what? What's the matter with you?" Grisbane said. His words crawled down his tabard and lodged in his belt. Nedrillo watched them wiggle.

"It's the mycotoxins in that shit they were drinking," said Meltbrew. Nedrillo heard the words as "Oxen zits in michael's catchit see work trinkle." His mouth refused to close.

"Give him this," came the thick voice of Weregrand from behind them. He wagged a small inhaler between two claws. Grisbane seized it and emptied its bluish vapors into Nedrillo's gape.

To Nedrillo it felt like an enema delivered through his ear. He kept trying to breathe, but whatever he inhaled seemed to exit through every pore of his body just as fast as he gasped for breath. Numerous strangenesses, among them the Flatulent Polyps of Wisdom and the Prophetic Lymphatic Tesseract, packed their bags and left his head, complaining noisily. His knees finally straightened. The room braked to a halt.

"That's better," Meltbrew said.

"By the steaming organ of Wildwretch," Nedrillo panted, clutching his snakelocks until they chattered, "What was all that?"

The feasting hall, with cleaned and flayed kills from the Wedding Hunt hung from its high ceiling, echoed with the sounds of music and singing. The musicians had regrouped and gained reinforcements from a troupe of Rentilitamum bodyplayers, whose amplified, high-pitched grankings of their stubble rang harmoniously over the throbs and rataplans of the Treffinilians and the birdtones of their hypersoprano vocalist. They all held forth on a raised stage at one end of the hall, joined by large numbers of dancers from all clans in the blend of belly-wrestling, slow-dancing, and interpretive martial arts called the Marriage Grandigore. Vessin wove and gyrated onstage with a frustrated-looking Wringlip; Nedrillo noted with a thrill of satisfaction

writhed up into spirals and collapsed into tangles, all four dipped large spoons in bowls of shredded meat and flung the delicacy at the crowd. Over triumphant music, cheers leaped up.

PUSHED BY DREIENDINE, WRINGLIP, AND THE OTHER HONORED WOMEN of the wedding, the cart lumbered to where Nedrillo sat, and stopped. He goggled. A seven-foot-long array of fillets, chops, steaks and tidbits, mingled with spice leaves, fruit slices, and tubers, all sculpted and gilded with sweet honey and oil, lay before him under the vast swath of decorations leering out at everyone. The music fell to a whisper, a waiting pulse.

"What do I do now?" Nedrillo muttered to Wardfurrow. Dreieindine glared at him.

"Bless it and wish everyone long appetite," Wardfurrow whispered.

Nedrillo did. When he was finished, Engrebaile leaped up, overturning his goblet. "From the Krendiss—our gift to you the parents, Nedrillo, Dreieindine, Wringlip, and Vessin, and the new couple, Grisbane and Pelliannas!" He turned to the room, spreading his scaly arms. "Now, we feast!" A roar answered him. He speared a chop and offered it to Nedrillo.

"You first," Nedrillo said, trying to be polite. In answer, Engrebaile laughed and dropped the slab of meat on Nedrillo's plate.

"My turn will come," said Engrebaile, and he helped himself to some of the other food. Wardfurrow snorted at Nedrillo, seized a fork, and took two large cutlets. The music rose in a rapid dance tempo. The women pushed the cart onward. Nedrillo looked over at Vessin's table and saw a woman refastening Vessin's suit. Too bad.

As she passed, Dreieindine hissed to Nedrillo, "I will have much to say to you when this is over." Nedrillo's snakelocks echoed her sibilants and liquids for emphasis.

ENGREBAILE NODDED AS HE nibbled. *"For my part, I thought he was delicious too, even at his age. Usually gorgons get stringy late in life, especially with ten daughters and sons like he had."*

Nedrillo looked at her retreating back and murmured, "Too late, my dear, I'm actually starting to enjoy myself." He turned back to the succulent aromas and scents awaiting him.

"This is wonderful," Nedrillo said to Engrebaile and Wardfurrow as he rolled the tender meat on his tongue. "Such an unusually juicy texture." He called the waiter to get him another piece. As he waited he looked around the room. "I see Weregrand, with Dreieindine's clan. But where is Drimbeldard? He should be at our table."

"Why, he is," said Engrebaile. "Do you know nothing? The Leader of the Feast partakes, and is partaken." He pointed at the steaming steak arriving for Nedrillo's plate. "Do you not find him to your liking?" He smiled as only a crocodilian can.

Nedrillo blinked. All of his snakes stood straight out from his head, the fardoon at the nape of his neck the farthest of all. "You mean ..." He pointed at the steak.

"This is what I meant," Wardfurrow put in, leaning his bulk against Nedrillo's shoulder. "No place better to explain. Would you believe it any other way?"

Nedrillo looked up. Everyone at the table was watching him. He gulped. "I guess you're right." He finished chewing the bite in his mouth. The savory aroma made him salivate again. "You know, he was great." He took another bite. "And still is." Engrebaile inclined his long head politely. "And I've got several more to marry off!"

Nedrillo laughed, feeling at ease at last. The trizark was working. He saw heads turn back to their meals. "I just don't know if I can pay for another one," he admitted.

"Well, take your time," the smiling Engrebaile said to him. "When Drimbeldard's last one finally married, he was elected to this honored station. It cleared his debts from five of these." He swept his scaled arm at the banquet hall, and the depleted feast cart. Then he turned his slit-pupil eyes directly at Nedrillo. "Of course, when one of ours marries a human, the Leader of the Feast is a Father Gorgon." His smile spread to the back of his jaws.

"Of course," gulped Nedrillo. *Maybe Dad knew what he was doing when he joined the Thellvoil.* He took a very deep breath and tried to emulate Engrebaile's grin. His gorgon facial muscles failed him, but to his surprise his stomach was working perfectly. "Waiter! Two more trizarks," he said, "and ... could I please have another of those irresistible cutlets, before they're gone?" Watching Wardfurrow and the others working lustily on their third pigdeer, he decided to take his time. "My dear Engrebaile," he said, "you've been to these before. What was the last one like?"

Engrebaile nodded as he nibbled. "It was for Weregrand's second son, Twerenich. The Greater Snakes made trouble, complaining as usual about the drinks and the music. But EnTorken, you know, the Leader of the Feast, was the master—dignified but playful. For my part, I thought he was delicious too, even at his age. Usually gorgons get stringy late in life, especially with ten daughters and sons like he had."

Nedrillo felt hands on his shoulders. Turning his head left and then right, he saw his daughters Brevelik and Darjann and his sons Meltbrew and Feltwine leaning over him.

"Father," Brevelik said in his ear in her most winning voice, "It's beautiful. Can I have one like this when it's my turn?"

"Me too, Father," Darjann said, massaging his neck.

"Grisbane always got the best," Meltbrew said, "so why not make ours better this time?"

"Yeah," Feltwine added.

"Please?" The word seemed to come at Nedrillo from all sides.

"I'll do my best," he said to them, leaning back. "But you don't want me to end up like that, do you?" He waved his hand toward the cart with Drimbeldard's crocodilian rib-bones basketing a shrinking supply of cutlets and dressings.

"But, Father," Darjann said, "Wouldn't it be worth it to make us all so happy? You wouldn't want us to have to pay the debt for you, would you? It wouldn't have to be until mine. You know I'm always last."

Nedrillo looked at their joyful, expectant smiles; a shiver passed through him. Brevelik and Darjann were teasing his snakelocks, making them snap at tiny tidbits of sweetened meat. "You know I'd do just about anything for you..." he started to say.

"Thank you, Father!" They all jumped up and ran to the dance floor, jabbering, before he could finish.

The trizarks arrived. Nedrillo sat holding them for a long time, counting his children, his wealth, and his years. Stringy. The room tried once again to revolve around his head; he stopped it. One of his Bent Leg leftovers, the Sexual Toadface Oracle, began to narrate the Insect Beatitudes in a whiny little voice; with great effort, he banished it. Finally he stood up and raised both glasses. Maybe he could still get the hang of this. He and Vessin would get the bill when it was all over. No wonder Vessin scowled! If they were brothers no other way...

"Vessin Krellford! You slimenose hairball! Come and drink with me! Our time is short!" A roar of approval rose around him. He shook out his snakelocks, bit his lip, and looked around with a grin. Lifted up on the gladness, among the waving hissing tresses, the reptile smiles and the wild shaking heads of hair, he threw back his head and laughed. It came out in a full, croaking gorgon roar. □

With the threads of reality unraveling, only the Shapers could prevent the total collapse of the universe.

REALITY SCHOOL: IN THE ENTROPY ZONE

BY JEFFREY A. CARVER
Illustration by Doug Chezem

As we walk through the entropic boundary, I expect to feel...I don't know what...some startling physical sensation. Instead, it's more like walking into the shadow of a towering building. A draft of cooler air passes through my blouse. Then everything changes...

LOOKING BACK, IT SEEMS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE to believe. Reality School, from matriculation to retirement, was supposed to fill seven of my best years—years of learning and challenge, and perhaps even occasionally danger. The time I actually spent cannot be measured; it was a time in which the world almost changed beyond recognition—and I changed into something, someone, I hardly know.

For my first day at school, my parents had gotten us up at dawn and piled me and my older sister into our ancient station wagon, Woodie. We drove for a long time, before turning into the entrance to the school. I remember this clearly, even though I was a girl only six and a half at the time. My parents told me later that I'd complained so much about the length of the trip that they very nearly turned around and drove me back home. They wouldn't have, of course; they knew how important the Reality School was—not just to us, but to the whole world. Why else would they have put me through all that testing, and cried when I was accepted?

I remember this too: my complaints vanished the instant we passed through the Reality School's continuum-bubble. A great shock wave hit the hood of the car and flashed past the windows in rainbow colors, and suddenly everything around us changed. Everything—including Woodie. Our station wagon was transformed from a sagging road-barge into a shining fuselage, powered by glowing fusion thrusters and floating on a magnetic cushion. I screamed with joy and amazement,





deafening my mom and dad. Marie was screaming just as loudly. At the same moment, the school grounds changed from scorched desert grass to a fairyland setting of whipped cream lawns, cotton candy trees, and gingerbread buildings. I hopped up and down with delight.

It was all window-dressing, of course—not just for the kids, but for the parents, who were preparing to leave their children with a school that few of them could really hope to understand. The parents believed in the school's mission, or they wouldn't have been there; but it probably helped to have the special effects to ease the transition. The effects had little to do with the *real* function of the school, of course, but it would take us a while to understand that.

Daddy drove up to the parking area, where a centaur with an arm-band directed him to a space that looked as if it had been saved just for us. We all piled out, Daddy warning me not to touch the fusion thrusters, whose glow was slowly fading to chrome silver. We had a good laugh, walking around our gleaming spaceship-car. Then a team of whinnying ponies drew up, pulling a cart for my bags. We loaded the cart and headed into the administration building.

I HAVE NO MEMORY OF REGISTRATION, BUT I VIVIDLY recall the “reality-view” posters that glowed in the walls, and the clots of strange kids gathered around gawking at them. The posters looked like moving holograms, and at first I thought they were just pictures made by artists. It turned out they were actual images of reality-threads that “shapers,” as graduates of the school were called, had encountered and safely sealed off from our time line. Marie and I gaped at a world where everyone lived in clouds, where the whole *world* seemed to be clouds, and nothing looked quite solid, including the people. “Wow,” I said, feeling the kind of thrill that I got from my favorite stories.

Then we turned to an image filled with stalactites and stalagmites that flickered and slowly changed color as if under a black light. That one stumped us, until an older boy stepped up and explained that it was microscopic metal crystals: a world where everything was solid-state, and all life took the form of electrons and photons. Phew, I thought. Why bother?

The boy, though, seemed to actually *like* the idea, the way I'd liked the clouds. He grinned and told me his name was Ashok. And I began to wonder if kids like him were about to become my friends.

IT WAS ONLY A LITTLE LATER, AT THE DORM, THAT MOM AND DAD AND Marie had to say good-bye to me. I flashed from giddy pleasure to tears, and starting bawling, “I don't want to stay! I don't *want* to! I want to go *home*!”

“Alexandra, we've been planning this a long time,” my dad started to say, trying to be rational. Only he couldn't get it out; he started crying too, and turned away so I wouldn't see. You'd think it would have been Mom crying, but she was the one who tried to calm me down. “Honey, the tests said you were one in a million. Now, you go show them how you can do this! It's so important—”

“No, no, no, I don't care...!”

That was when the school's departure routine kicked in. My dorm room suddenly blossomed out into a beautiful little sun porch, where some of my favorite characters—Peter Rabbit and Eeyore and Maxine the bunny and Berlioz the bear were all having tea together, and one after another, they beckoned me to join them. That broke the cycle of tears, for the moment; it was enough to make me let my parents go.

And from then on, life was never to be the same...not even in the ways we'd expected.

I AM UTTERLY ALONE—IN A STEAMING JUNGLE. ANIMALS SHRIEK IN THE distance. Where has everyone gone? “Rober-r-r-ta?” I cry, shivering. “Lisa? Danny?” I stumble back the way I came, searching for them. But where the entropic boundary stretched a moment ago, a jungle now goes on forever.

I teeter on the edge of panic. If I'm to find my world again, I can

only plunge ahead. I have a job to do. An adult's job, even if I am only six and a half. I have already grown beyond my calendar age.

But I seem to have forgotten what exactly I am supposed to do.

LISA HOOPNER, MY ROOMMATE, BECAME MY BEST FRIEND RIGHT FROM day one. She was just a few months older than I was, and one of the things I liked about her was her laugh, which was a kind of whoop that came out at the funniest times. Another thing I liked was her Bahhston accent. We didn't talk with accents in California, I said; and every time I said it, she gave a whoop and talked to me in a bubbling upbeat voice that was supposed to sound like people from around here. I didn't think it sounded much like me, but it made me laugh anyway.

Lisa and I were both pretty homesick, but it helped having each other to be friends with. For one thing, we both liked Berlioz and Maxine, and we both thought Mr. Playstead, the head teacher, was nice but kind of stuffy, and we both liked Mrs. Randolph because she made us laugh, and we both thought the cafeteria was awesomely yucky. Once we'd agreed on all that, everything else seemed pretty minor. Oh, and we both liked Danny Hutton, a boy from Iowa who, we could tell, was putting on a brave front, even though he was obviously even more homesick than we were.

Most of the kids were pretty nice. We had a lot of counseling sessions, some by ourselves and some in groups, where we talked about the things that we liked and the things that scared us. That helped us get to know each other, I guess. I understand now that they'd selected us not just for our imaginations, but for a certain sociability and a certain toughness of mind, not that I would have put it that way then. They didn't want any wild-eyed or selfish individualists getting hold of the reins of reality. It was risky enough with the people they did choose.

The teachers had lots of activities to help us get to know each other—games and stories and plays. But the main activity was learning to *shape reality*.

IN THE BEGINNING WE SHAPED STORYBOOK LANDSCAPES AND SCENES. Try to imagine a roomful of six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds bubbling with imagination, perched under strange helmets of silver and glass, with visions of stories taking form right before their eyes. (None of our creations were permanent, of course—and they were strictly confined within the shielded training rooms. But if a leakage had occurred, the continuum-barriers around the school grounds would have kept anything we did from reaching the world outside.)

We learned right away that our mind's eye views of such magical places as Oz, Middle Earth, Peter Rabbit's forest, and Barsoom differed wildly from one another. Sometimes that caused arguments, which we were supposed to settle among ourselves. But other times we just had fun building one vision upon another, castle upon cloud upon ocean upon desert—until our landscapes grew into something that was as much *us* as it was the stories that had inspired us. We were learning to create. Later, we would learn to *choose* realities from the crazy chaos that the universe offered up to us. But in those days, we were consumed with *building*.

We were also learning to share...

One day Lisa and I worked together on a special play cottage made of clouds. It was delicate, puffy, and ethereal—and it had lightning bolts flashing across the doorways, and only Lisa and I could make the lightning go away to let us in. Even so, we made sure the point got across by patrolling the area in our helmets, telling everyone else to stay out. Mr. Playstead came upon us and planted himself in my path with a scowl. “Alexandra,” he said sternly, “this space is for everyone, not just for people who appoint themselves queen for a day.”

I was stunned, and suddenly ashamed. I didn't know quite what he meant by “queen for a day,” but I *knew* we were supposed to share our creations with everyone and not keep them to ourselves. I felt my face get hot as I looked at Lisa. Mr. Playstead hadn't said anything to her yet. She looked away guiltily. I knew we were both in for a special counseling session later, after Mr. Playstead reported this.

I was ready to let the cottage dissolve back into a cloud of smoke, taking me with it. But Lisa was quicker. She caught Tommy Harte's

eye and, with a look, invited him into the cottage. When Mr. Playstead saw that, he nodded approvingly. Lisa cheered up right away. Before I knew what was happening, she'd opened the cottage into a big pavilion and told *everyone* to come in. I stood there, burning with humiliation, as Mr. Playstead watched Lisa being so generous.

I stalked away, refusing to look at her. Finally, I sat down in a far corner of the room to make shapings by myself. The only trouble was, no ideas came. Nothing at all. I was getting madder by the minute. I heard Lisa come up behind me, and I glanced her way sullenly, ready to say something nasty.

"Meow."

She was holding a pair of little gray tiger kittens, offering one to me. I glowered. But I took one of the kittens anyway, and after Lisa had gone back to play, I hugged it carefully. It purred and strutted in my lap, and as I petted it, I began to feel better.

When the counselor asked me about it later (in my regular session—Mr. Playstead didn't send me in for a special visit after all), I told her that I knew I shouldn't have done that with the private cottage-making, and I wouldn't do it again. She peered at me through her big, wide glasses and said, "You mean you've learned something about not being selfish?"

I shrugged, uncomfortable under her stare. "I guess so."

Dr. Shelby nodded carefully. "Have you forgiven Lisa for being quicker and cleverer about changing what she was doing when you both got caught?"

The question surprised me. I didn't think Lisa *had* been caught. But yes, the kitten had helped me forgive her.

I nodded.

"You know, it's a pretty tall order to learn not to think just of yourself," Dr. Shelby observed. "But this thing between you and Lisa could be a valuable lesson. If the time ever comes when you have to reach deep inside yourself for strength, deeper than you think you *can* reach, I hope it will help you to remember this."

I stared back at her in alarm. Although she said it nicely, I could feel the weight of seriousness behind her words. Anything that would make me remember *this* in a good way, I thought, was something I didn't want to face. But I didn't say that; I just nodded.

Dr. Shelby peered at me. The light glinted off her glasses as she looked at the clock and said our session was over.

I WALK, ALONE AND LONELY, THROUGH THE PELLUCID GREEN LIGHT OF the jungle. After a time, I step through a hedge...and my surroundings change utterly, to a world of astonishing precipices and ravines, illumined by lightning flashes. Another reality, joined to mine like a soap bubble? Or is this my world, after entropy has ravaged it like a marauding beast?

With a shiver, I back away from a terrifying precipice. "Where have you all gone?" I whisper to my missing friends. "What am I supposed to do here, all alone?" Even as I ask, I know the answer: Find the reality-thread that belongs to us, and bring it back to our world.

There is no one here—just a few winged creatures, soaring off the cliffs, pterodactyl-like. Still, I feel—I cannot say how—that Lisa is out there, not in this place of cliffs and ravines, maybe, but somewhere, across some gulf that I cannot even see. I cry out to her in a tiny voice, barely a whisper:

I struggle to think. It is not just the world gone mad; it is me, too. I am no longer the person I was, not a six-year-old girl, or even a twelve-year-old. I look down at my lanky, bony body and flex my leathery wings. What have I turned into?

I peer down into a ravine. Lights twinkle in the darkness below. Cities? I feel a surge of hope. Perhaps down there are people, some connection...

I launch myself from the cliff.

WE GREW UP FAST IN THE REALITY SCHOOL, AND NOT JUST FAST, BUT differently from our sisters and brothers on the outside. I guess our parents knew that could happen and thought it worth the risk. What we had to do was so dreadfully important, and it could only be done by people who started very, very young. People with plastic minds,

who could learn to visualize (discern, they called it) different levels of reality without blocking out what they saw with denial. People with blazing imaginations, without the layers of preconceptions that adults have, who could be trained to pick out entropic changes at a distance and visualize appropriate responses.

That's adult-talk. Sorry; what they needed was young people with unbridled hope. People like us.

We learned about this gradually, over time, absorbing our mission not so much through our heads as through our pores. When we graduated, it would be up to us to "maintain the order." Even now that sounds ponderous to me—almost pretentious. A few years ago, it would have been preposterous. But of course that was before the entropic rift opened, before the Earth became a place where reality "fluttered" from day to day, and moment to moment.

T

HE FIRST TIME WE GOT TO SEE REAL shapers at work was, undoubtedly, the turning point—when I really began to feel in my bones what we were doing.

The teachers led us single file into a shielded observation room that overlooked the actual Reality Shaping Center. This was where the best of us would work after graduation. It was the only such center in America, one of three in the world. We were electrified with excitement and whispered and hissed to each other while our teachers frowned over the group. I sat between Lisa and Roberta Kisnet, and we held each other's hands tightly, trying to keep from bursting with anticipation.

The shapers were four or five years older than us, which seemed a lifetime. They wore silver helmets which, surprisingly, were smaller and simpler-looking than our training helmets. A few of them walked around, but mostly they stayed seated, their gloved hands waving in the air as they gestured and probed at whatever realities they were viewing in their closed universes.

They were not actually *journeying* in other realities, we were told—but viewing them through tiny windows opened in the continuum by the shaping amplifiers. They were watching for reality-threads that threatened to intrude upon our own...like radar watching for enemy airplanes. We saw the other realities on monitors, along with the adult supervisors. About half the center was filled with consoles, where the supervisors coordinated everything that was happening here with the centers at CERN and Kyoto—a lot of frowning adults with headsets studying computer consoles. But the other side, where the shapers were working...*wow*.

We saw a dramatic episode almost right away. On one of the shapers' monitors, a strange scene came into focus: a mountain range melting under a big red sun. I stared open-mouthed, as a teacher explained. It was *our* sun, diseased and swollen, devouring our Earth—in another reality. I sat frozen, not sure whether to be fascinated or terrified. We heard the voices of the supervisors calling additional shapers into the circuit and explaining exactly what was wrong. "...We've got to calm that sun down, give us a nice cool breeze...that's it...and hold the mountains together with your hands..." And we saw the shapers stirring in their seats, turning to one another and working together with murmurs of agreement. We saw the mountains being held in place by ghostly, virtual hands—and we saw icy breaths cooling the sun.

I scarcely understood what I was seeing; but the image-crafting of three or four shapers, working in harmony, was pushing away that dangerous reality-thread. There was something almost mystical, and very personal, about the shapers' joined struggle against the forces of entropy. The scientific staff didn't explain it that way; they talked of *synergistic field-configurations* and *Lang-Lawrence contractions*. But as far as the shapers were concerned, there was an *enemy* out there. And by creating their images in concert, they were able to defeat the enemy, or at least to push it back out of range.

Were they actually *cooling* that bloated sun in the other reality,

changing what existed in another thread, or were they just weaving a spell to prevent the thread from intruding on our own? In a practical sense, it didn't matter. What mattered was that they were closing off the danger from our own world, keeping the enemy at bay however they could. It was like virtual reality—except that any one of those threads could have come swirling up out of the netherrealms of chaos to overwhelm our world, if the shapers had not been there with their fingers in the dike, manning the ramparts, battening down the hatches of reality.

I didn't know then that the really dramatic perils were the easiest to detect at a distance, and the easiest to defend against. Most of the dangers were more insidious—shifts in climate, or in ecological balances, or even changes in human history. The shapers often sensed a change—and then had to wait, like bloodhounds on leashes, while the supervisors conferred about what courses of action to follow, or even about which reality-thread was the right one. There, we learned, lay the subtlest perils to our world.

We beginning students were far more interested in the vivid dangers. To our satisfaction, before we left the center that day, we saw spidery aliens marching through the streets of St. Louis, enclosing buildings in strange cocoons. As one, we felt a great, gasping pulse of fear before the aliens faded in a shimmer of heat—as a group of shapers focused their thoughts together and wove a web of protection that banished the aliens from our reality.

When our observation session was over, I could hardly move. I was trembling in my seat, and my fingers were white from clenching Lisa's hand so hard. I looked at Lisa and she looked wide-eyed back at me.

I had never in my life been so scared.

Or so excited.

I SOAR, SPIRALING DOWN INTO THE DARKNESS OF THE RAVINE, PRAYING that the twinkling jewels below me are civilization. I am breathless with fear. What have I turned into, that I soar on leathery wings? Am I not still human?

"Yes, I am!" I cry, and with that, my wings are gone, and I am falling. The sparkling points below me are not cities but...stars. My heart pounds. I want to scream, but my breath will not leave my chest.

Is anyone else alive in the great void of stars wheeling around me? "Lisa?" I whisper. "Roberta? Danny? Ashok?" For a heart-stopping moment I see their faces in the stars, luminous faces. I imagine that they are calling out to me. But I am helpless to answer. There is a power blocking me, a darkness called chaos. I imagine the entire population of the Earth, all of humanity, floating out there, calling to me.

I am supposed to save them.

Weightless, I fall...

W

E CONTINUED TO SPEND A LOT of time with the counselors, doing group exercises and letting off steam and trying to understand the meaning to us of what we were training for. But I don't think, really, that there was any way they could truly prepare us for a job that

was, essentially, to hold the world in our hands.

Eventually the gravity of our teachers' words began to reverberate like bass drum beats—not so much in the classrooms as in our minds:

"...the sorting of entropic realities demands the talents of children your age..."

"...must do what older people, even experts, can't..."

"...when adults try to focus through these windows, it turns to mud...adults resist...we're never sure, the layers of ambiguity are too great..."

"...as you learn to feel the difference between realities... must learn wisdom, yet through a lens of innocence..."

"...might last until you're thirteen...only one has worked past four-

teen, by the calendar...."

By the calendar: We were already aware that we were growing older at an accelerated rate, our intellects and emotions veering ahead in an alarming, zigzag fashion. It all had to do with entropy.

I never really understood entropy, not the way the scientists talked about it. We learned about disorder, of course, and something called "the laws of thermodynamics," which were undergoing some late revision. It might have been the work of theorists that had brought us to this plight in the first place. Not that they'd meant to; they were just fooling around with fusion implosions and micro-singularities, and trying to learn how to control entropic folds in space-time...not on a world-wide scale, but on a quantum level, a subatomic level. What harm could there possibly be in that? But somehow there *was* harm in it; somehow they caused, or at least allowed entry to, the rift that put us where we are now.

Many of them denied that. It was entropic drift, they theorized—a natural phenomenon, swirling just below the apparent calm of our space-time continuum. It may have been chance that it intruded into our world when it did; and without the developments that made the shaping amplifiers possible, we would have been defenseless against it. But whether it was a natural phenomenon or an artificial one was irrelevant now. Either way, it threatened to destroy our world as we knew it. Not that it *meant* to; it wasn't living; it didn't know us, didn't care about us one way or another. It just followed the laws of physics. But the laws of physics changed from one reality-thread to the next.

What the shapers had to know was how to sort through the many possible realities that floated like tangled seaweed in the ocean of entropy, and how to follow the one strand that belonged to our timeline and our lives. Not just our lives personally, but the life of the world. The job of the shapers was to preserve reality, guided by the supervision staff, according to guidelines agreed upon by the joint policy committees...

"...what you will be doing is a privilege, and a responsibility. You will be honored for doing what no one else on Earth can do..."

NOT EVERYONE HONORED WHAT WE WERE DOING, NOT AT ALL. MANY people were only vaguely aware of the reality schools at all, and didn't much care about us one way or another—except maybe to object to the government funding that kept us going. They thought—I don't know, that we were doing nothing real at all—casting illusions in the air, mirages, New Age miracles, who knew what for, maybe just for our own entertainment.

How *could* they believe that, when we all knew—despite the best efforts of the shaping centers—that changes were inevitably creeping into our continuum?

Were people just stupid? At first I thought so. Later, I understood better. It's called *variable persistence of memory*. Simply put: different people remember the past differently...for a while. Every time our reality-thread changes, there is a collective adjustment of memory. But not all at once, or at the same time. An extreme example: If I wake up one morning remembering that Unimerica has fifty-seven states and the capital is in Toronto, and you remember that it's only forty-seven states and the capital is in Washington—and the history books at the library disagree with each other—that's variable persistence of memory. A few weeks later, we'll all remember the same thing. But which way will it be? And which was the original? The staffs at the shaping centers are supposed to know, but their memories change too. So whom do we believe?

What a lot of people believed was: nothing has changed.

My example may have been a poor one. Nothing that dramatic had happened, that we knew of. A more realistic example might have been something like this: a subtle shift in global climate, or in population patterns of the tsetse fly. Then you have the supervisory staffs arguing over what *was*, or what *should be*.

And it's those questions that set off the people who opposed us. They were in the minority, we were told—but they were everywhere. We were opposed by elements of the religious right, the humanist left, the Islamic center, the Russian capitalist resurgence, the South

African whoknowswhats, and a whole lot more that I've mercifully forgotten. Some of them opposed us because they didn't have shaping centers of their own and they felt disadvantaged; others opposed us because we were "treading where mankind wasn't meant to tread."

We were just kids. We were too young to understand—thank God, or Allah, or our lucky stars, take your pick—that there were groups that would have liked nothing better than to close us down, or even kill us if necessary. The extremists were a small minority, and we were well insulated from them.

The plain truth was, most people didn't understand what it was that we did—or why. Some thought that we deliberately *changed* reality, a bunch of meddlers altering the natural order of things according to our own whims. Early on, before the U.N. committee was formed and guidelines established, there might have been those who tried that; but those people were stopped after they tried to eradicate the mosquito and changed a hundred ecologies by accident. No, we at the Reality School were closely supervised; and the coordination with the Euro and Japanese groups was intense, with several major universities involved. There were the occasional policy disagreements, but those were minor. Or so we were told.

At the time, they didn't say too much to us about the rumors of other nations hurrying to build their own shaping centers, outside the control of the U.N. committee. Or about the bombing in Baghdad of what was supposed to have been a munitions plant, but nobody really believed it....

The hardest opponents for us to hear about were the ones like Reverend Patwell and his church, right in the next county, who claimed not that we were favoring American interests over others, but that we were defying God's will by imposing our order onto His.

That was nonsense, of course. As far as I was concerned, we were helping God hold His world together. OK, maybe humans had caused this mess in the first place. But without us—or people like us—who knew what might have become of our world, our reality?

I can talk about it with a certain clarity now, because I've seen what happened when it went wrong. I've seen what happened when the school, the neighborhood, the whole fix on the reality that was our world began to dissolve.

THE VOICES AND FACES HAVE FADED. I SENSE A PLANETARY SURFACE beneath me, and the hazy glow of an atmosphere. I have come to rest, pressed against a rocky surface, stars twinkling overhead.

Where am I what am I who am I...?

I live I breathe I think I feel...

In the gloom of an unearthly dawn, I curl my fingers in front of me, and I can just make out their webbed, bony shape.

Terrified, I shut my eyes and imagine a place of darkness where chaos lives and reaches out to destroy this universe...and I begin to feel that this chaos has needs and wants of its own, and it is insatiable. And somehow it is testing me.

I hear a rumbling groan...of something living, something in pain. I stand and look around. I am on a tiny island in the midst of a green sea.

I am halfway up a small, rocky knoll, and I climb it on my webbed hands and feet. I peer over a ledge and see a bloated, toadlike monster, bellowing to the sky, bellowing...

IT WAS MAY, AND OUT ON THE PLAYGROUND SOME GIRLS WERE PRACTICING unamplified "makings"—little cloud castles floating along the hedgerow separating our school from a convent on the grounds behind us. There wasn't much that could happen with unamped makings; it was like projecting little holograms, using the outdoor landscape programs. Except this time something did happen—something terrible.

I was in the cafeteria with Lisa and Roberta. We heard the yelling and ran outside. Across the playing field, kids and teachers were gathered around someone on the ground. Some of the kids were screaming.

"Who is it? Who is it?" Someone was running beside us—Tommy Harte, I think.

"You children stay clear!" shouted Mr. Playstead, turning to wave

us back. We crept close enough to see that they were all gathered around the still form of a child.

At first we couldn't see who it was. Then Lisa cried, "It's Judy Keller! It's Judy! Is she *dead*?" Of course she isn't dead, I thought. But then I took a good look at Mr. Playstead's face—and I knew at once that she *was* dead. For a long, breathless moment, I wasn't so much scared as curious: Why was Judy dead? What could she have done that made her dead?

And then I felt fear and grief rush over me, in a great crashing wave.

It soon became obvious that the teachers were wondering the same thing I had wondered. Mr. Playstead raised his voice through the yelling and confusion. "Kids, *listen up!* This is *important*. I want you all to stop any shapings *right now*—even little ones. And I want to know, did anyone think, or imagine—even for a second, *even in play*—that Judy might die?"

"No!" "No!" We all frantically proclaimed our innocence, terrified of being blamed for Judy's death. All, that is, except poor Ellie Cottman, who burst into tears.

"Ellie?" Mr. Playstead asked, straining to make his voice gentle when you could tell he wanted to scream. "Did you...think about Judy dying? Or have some sort of *feeling* about it?"

Ellie nodded, sobbing. "Playing, we were only playing—" she babbled, and I looked at Lisa and she looked at me, agreeing with our eyes that *we* would never have done something so awful, and at the same time knowing that we could just as easily have done it. Then we all had to get out of the way, because the school infirmary people were there with stretchers and emergency gear, and they were trying to resuscitate Judy and they wanted us out of the way *now*.

I had a fleeting thought that maybe I could do something to help Judy—maybe some sort of a shaping that would restore her to life. It wasn't that I wanted to be a hero or anything; but I was so scared at this new thing, death, that had invaded our school that I would have done anything to drive it out. I was about to raise my hand and tell Mr. Playstead, when he seemed to sense my thought—or maybe what a lot of us were thinking. He suddenly barked, "Whatever happens, I don't want any of you trying to *think* Judy back alive! Is that understood?"

He turned, glaring, and that was when I saw the ground shifting and bubbling around the stretcher that Judy was lying on, and I realized that someone had already tried to do just what I was thinking. I followed Lisa's gaze and saw that it was Danny Hutton—you could tell by the crestfallen look on his freckled face—and Mr. Playstead probably saw it too, but he didn't say anything. He began herding us forcefully toward the buildings, saying over and over, "We have to find out what happened...my God, what could have happened...?"

THE BEAST LOOKS UP AT ME WITH FIERY eyes, its breath hissing like a great steam engine. Behind it, something is thrashing in the water. The beast roars in anguish and scrabbles helplessly at the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea. The water erupts. A second creature bursts into the air, struggling...and crashes under again. The first beast claws helplessly at the ledge, and glares up at me with eyes that are not threatening, but pleading.

I look at my webbed hand and shudder with understanding. No no no...I'm terrified of deep water...the thing is huge, how could I possibly...? The creature's roar shatters my thoughts. I don't know this creature, don't want to know it, don't know the rules here, don't know what is happening.

Through my cowardly shame I see, or imagine, a squirming patch of darkness in the sky. Entropy. Chaos. Feeding on my fear, my inaction.

I climb awkwardly over the stones, scuttling past the creature, burned by the pain in its eyes. I gaze down and see its mate, a blotch deep in the green water, sinking.

I hesitate a long moment before I leap.

BY THE TIME THEY GOT US ALL GATHERED FOR A MEETING IN THE SCHOOL auditorium, I knew that the world had been altered in some new and terrible way, that something had torn us loose from reality's moorings. The meeting was hopeless, just a lot of whispered conferences among the teachers and school officials. Once in a while they turned to the kids to comfort us, or ask something, or sometimes just to gaze helplessly over the room. They admonished us not to use our powers until they learned what was going on. We could smell their fear. They didn't know what had gone wrong, but the implications clearly went beyond the death of one student, however awful and shocking that might have been.

I sat in my seat, cloaked in a strange, foggy calm. Once in a while, the numbing fog swirled, and I trembled in helpless terror. But whatever had happened, the older shapers would take care of it; they had to. We should just sit tight until they found out what had gone wrong and fixed it. That's what the teachers kept saying, and we tried to believe it. Lisa, beside me, chewed her knuckles and cried softly over and over, "Judy's dead, Alexandri...she's dead...Alexandri, what are we going to do...what are we going to do..." I don't think she actually looked at me once the whole time; she didn't look at anybody.

Despite the warnings, a lot of kids were having trouble keeping their imaginations in check. The auditorium kept trembling with little quakes of suppressed shapings, imaginary beings and objects flickering in the air, then vanishing. The teachers must have announced a dozen times that we were about to move into the shielded training rooms, where even our random shapings could have no permanent effect. The first few times, I felt reassured—*something* was being done—but there was always some delay, and we stayed in the auditorium while maintenance people rushed about trying to put up temporary shields.

The teachers themselves were looking more and more panicky, and we all wished that we could *hear* them talking among themselves—and I guess someone finally wished hard enough to make it happen. We suddenly heard Mr. Tea's voice boom out into the auditorium as he whispered to Miss Jennings: "—A NEW ENTROPIC FOLD—THE SHAPING CENTER IS GONE! IT'S VANISHED COMPLETELY! CERN AND KYOTO, TOO. WE HAVE NO ONE LEFT BUT THE STUDENTS. GOD HELP US!"

And that was when Mr. Tea realized that *everyone* was hearing him. He closed his mouth and turned pale, as the auditorium fell dead silent.

THE SEA CRASHES AROUND MY EARS. I AM BREATHING WATER. I BLINK, and my vision clears. This is the element my body was made for, not the harsh rocks of the island.

I cry out and hear my voice booming in great echoes over the sea floor. Rolling, I peer downward and see the base of the atoll slanting into the shadowy depths, and far below, the drowning creature. I plummet in pursuit. By the time I come alongside it, I am swimming in a twilight world. I hook the being's arm, circle around it, and find myself squarely before its eyes—dark and sightless. I have come too late...I waited too long, too fearful...

I release her body to sink into the abyss. And the gray of the undersea world closes in around me.

NO NEED TO BELABOR THE BEDLAM, THE NEAR BREAKDOWN OF ORDER in the school, the disappearance of the counselors and most of the teachers.

No need to belabor our panic, when four of *us* vanished, swallowed by a wall of fog that materialized in the courtyard, neatly dividing us as we were walking back, in exhaustion, to our dorms.

No need to belabor our helplessness.

Had one of *us* somehow caused this? There was no reason to think so. And yet... Judy had died, and I could think of many times when I'd thought mean things about one or another of my classmates, or teachers—and any one of those times might have caused the same thing to happen.

Outside the school, it took a few days for the world to catch up with what had happened. What Mr. Tea had said was true, but, as we soon learned, only part of the truth. Apparently a new shaping center had

come on line, somewhere in China, without any coordination with our center or the ones at CERN or Japan. The result was some sort of conflict—*disharmony*, they called it—in the shapings from one center to the next. No one knew exactly what the conflict was, but the result was that all four centers vanished, shapers and all, into a newly created entropic fold. And our school hovered right at the brink of the fold. The continuum-bubble provided some protection for the outside, but ripple effects were being felt all over the world: freak storms, unexplained computer failures, bridges collapsing... and it was all being blamed on us.

The political uproar was incredible.

A lot of people called for us to be shut down at once. We weren't really *doing* anything at that point, since it was just the students and a handful of teachers left, and no shaping amplifiers; but that didn't stop them from calling for our heads. The school perimeter was physically sealed off, though we still had electronic communication, and we were dependent upon supplies and electric power from the outside. Security for the power lines was beefed up right away. The integrity of the continuum-barrier was essential; it was the only way to keep whatever terrible thing had swallowed our people from swallowing the rest of the world too.

The scientists said that the new fold in the entropic zone appeared to have produced a strange doubling over of the continuum-bubble that enclosed our Reality School. Something similar must have happened in China and Japan and at CERN, but there the folds had closed in upon themselves and vanished, swallowing the shaping centers whole. The training school at CERN had vanished, too; the one in Japan, located farther from the shaping center, was reportedly safe, but isolated from the fold. Only we were poised at the very edge of the entropic boundary.

There were rumors that a man-made singularity floated somewhere deep in the entropy zone, wreaking havoc, but our scientists said there was no evidence for that. To us kids, it was a meaningless question; we just knew that what was happening was bad. And there seemed nothing to be done about it. We were the only ones left. But what could *we* do—especially without the amps and our helmets?

Someone pointed out that Judy's death had happened just *after* the disappearance of our shapers—the result of a stray thought on the part of a student. So whatever had gone wrong, it meant that we students could exert more power than before. And that meant...bad things could happen even without the amps. But perhaps *good* things could happen without them, too.

That thought gave us hope. Not much, but it was something.

T

HE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED BROUGHT EVER more frightening news from the outside world: earthquakes, civil unrest, solar flares, threats of war. There was

little doubt now that it was connected to the entropic folding. At least now people believed that what we did here at the school was real.

And it was some consolation that the rest of the world still existed. One of my nightmares was that the entropic bubble would just swallow the Earth whole, the way it had swallowed the shapers, like a serpent devouring its tail.

Like everyone else, I phoned my parents and sister, and afterward cried for hours. My parents wished they'd never enrolled me at the school, and they wanted to take me home. But that was impossible, of course—and not just because of the continuum-bubble that enclosed us. Outside our perimeter, we were now effectively quarantined—not by the civil authorities, but by a growing army of protesters.

We first learned about it on the TV news. The Robert Patwell church had gotten to us first and formed a human blockade around the school property. They were praying and singing, and Reverend Patwell himself was out there with a microphone, calling on us to give up our pact with the devil. Never before had I seen such naked hatred directed at *me*. Other groups were out there, too, maneuver-

ing for position. Environmental groups were cheek-by-jowl with foreign agents, claiming we were destroying the world in the name of protecting the American way of life. Some were making noises about cutting off our power and water. Fortunately for our sanity, the school grounds were wooded *inside* the perimeter, and that kept the protesters mostly out of sight. We could just see one clot of them, way down at the end of our driveway.

We watched a big argument on TV between Reverend Patwell's people and some nuns from the Catholic convent over the hill from us. Apparently the nuns thought we were a hazard to God's Kingdom too; but they thought we were victims, not perpetrators. They didn't go around using names like "servants of the darkness." And they didn't take too kindly to Patwell leading his throngs over the convent grounds like an army invasion, setting up their human chain. Once Patwell had done it, all the others followed suit. The sheriff's department was out there, and the National Guard, and we were grateful to see men with rifles standing watch under the high tension power lines that fed our bubble.

"Jesus," said Harvey Snowden in disgust. He was one of the older boys, but he'd gotten too close to the wall of fog, and it had changed him. He now looked like a scrawny twenty-year-old woman. It scared the rest of us just to look at him. "Isn't it bad enough, without all these religious nuts going at it with each other?" Harvey was an atheist who wished they'd all go away.

That set off Danny Hutton, whose dad was a Congregational minister. Reverend Hutton had visited the school chapel once and preached to us about how the Reality School was a special kind of service to God—and if the scientists who had gotten us into this were guilty of meddling pride, so were certain church organizations. I tried to take comfort in those words now, but it wasn't easy. "Not everyone who *believes* is crazy like *them*!" Danny snarled. He stormed away from the TV—mad at Harvey, mad at Reverend Patwell, and mad at the gnawing zone of entropy that was eating our world alive.

"You'd think," said Lisa, quivering in front of the TV, "that people would try to behave a little better, what with the apocalypse on us and all." She got up to try again to call her parents; she hadn't been able to get through to them yet. She was worried that they'd already disappeared. Physically, Lisa looked to be about ten now, but something was happening; she was becoming a young woman. She was even starting to gravitate toward the boys for comfort, especially Danny Hutton. It was three days since the entropic fold had taken Judy and the shapers.

Apocalypse? I thought stupidly, and realized with a shock that all this really did have serious eschatological overtones to it.

Eschatological? Where the hell had I learned to use words like that? And know what they meant?

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME? I AM IN A DESOLATE WASTELAND OF ASH-choked craters and volcanic eruptions. Is it punishment for my failure to save the creature in the sea? Is this what it all turns into, when we fail, each one of us, to save the other? I hack for breath in the smoky air and stagger forward.

I can feel the flux of entropy burning around me like an electrical discharge, threatening to destroy not just the world but my own mind and soul. If I don't keep moving, I will die here. And I will have helped no one.

I trudge among volcanic vents that steam and smolder. What could my puny thoughts do to change this? Somewhere there must be a toehold on reality, a leverage point. It is what we came here, all of us, to find. "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the Earth," Archimedes said. That is what we must do, to push back the tide of entropy. And yet, flames of doubt lick at me. The ground shudders, a low rumble in the Earth. A moment later, a peak in front of me explodes. I fall to the ground as a column of smoke towers into the sky. Blazing lava rains down onto the Earth. A river of blood-red magma streams toward me.

Am I about to be incinerated, buried in final failure? As my mind seethes, the tide of burning earth drives toward me. And a thought slowly comes into focus: it was my own doubt that brought the vol-

cano into being. My own fears. If I allow them to, my fears will swallow and destroy me.

I remember the creature who died in the sea because of my hesitation. And yet I know: I am not powerless. I still have my being, my spirit, my will. I am a shaper. I blink, remembering that, as the lava sweeps toward me like a tidal wave of flame.



HEY'RE AT THE POWER LINES! THEY'RE trying to cut the power lines! Tell Mr. Playstead!" Roberta tore out the door of the TV room, running to find someone in charge.

I stood open-mouthed, watching her disappear around the corner. I ran into the TV room, where a few of the kids were watching the special report. On camera, a utilities truck was pulled up to an electric tower, and a man was maneuvering himself in the cherry picker toward the power lines. The camera switched to Reverend Patwell, who was rejoicing loudly. It looked to be protesters, not the electric company, doing the deed. *Where were the security forces?* "My God," I croaked. "If they cut off the power—"

"There goes the continuum-bubble," Harvey rattled hoarsely. He was trembling with rage.

"But don't we have some kind of...backup?" whispered Lottie Gerns. "A generator? Something?"

Harvey laughed like a man about to commit mayhem. It made me shiver, coming from someone who looked like a woman. "For the lights, yeah—but not the bubble. It takes too much power. Why do you think we have those high tension lines coming in?"

I swallowed, watching the man in the cherry picker. He was peering down, and the camera shifted to a knot of people gathered around some sort of control station. The man on the truck was waiting for the power to be shut off, so he could cut the line down.

"Then," I said, "there won't be any containment at all." Whatever effects had leaked out till now, the worst of the entropic influence was contained within our bubble.

"You got it," said Harvey. "Mr. Playstead! You see these jerks?"

Mr. Playstead was breathless as he ran into the room. "I just talked to the sheriff," he gasped. "He said they'd stop it. They don't know what happened to the security people—they seem to have vanished."

We watched, petrified, as the cameras panned to the flashing lights of the sheriff's cars pulling up. There was a lot of shouting. Finally the crowd gave way, and a couple of tough-looking deputies with high-powered rifles took up guard posts. After a short argument, the utility truck drove away.

I nearly collapsed with relief, my heart pounding. Where was Lisa? She hadn't seen this; I had to go tell her. I ran from the room, looking for her. She wasn't in the cafeteria, or in the dorm. I finally found her outside behind the main building, huddled on the grass under some trees. Not alone. With Danny Hutton. I ran up, yelling, "Lisa! Danny! You won't believe what—" before I saw what they were doing. They were kissing. No, more than kissing. They were *groping*. Frantically.

I staggered to a halt, the words still tumbling out of my mouth. Lisa shrank, glaring at me with murderous fury. "Would you get the hell out of here?" she snapped.

I stood there, dumfounded and humiliated. "But—" I choked, not knowing what to say next. I was appalled—but was it because she was doing this when the whole world was at stake, or because I was jealous? And who was I jealous of—Lisa or Danny?

Lisa seemed unable to say anything else; she just glared. Danny looked away from both of us, acutely embarrassed. In the end, I fled back to our room, hardly remembering why I'd been looking for her in the first place.

THAT NIGHT A LOUD CONCUSSION WOKE US ALL UP AND SENT US RUNNING to the TV. It took a few minutes for the backup generator to come on.

Continued on page 94

RIGHT: Two groups of astronauts explore one of the ringed planet's moons in Saturn from Mimas, a painting that originally appeared in Willy Ley's seminal book *Conquest of Space*.

CHESLEY BONESTELL founded the photographic realism school of space art. In *Life* and *Collier's* magazines he gave the world its first true look at what its future could be. As a boy, I was enchanted by the depth and stillness of his paintings. After admiring the work for decades, I finally met Chesley Bonestell in 1969. The following is the note I wrote after my only visit with him. He died in 1986 at the age of ninety-eight. Though we exchanged cards afterward, I never saw him again.

I approach Carmel, California with awe. His house is cloaked in wisps of fog. A cat melts away at your entrance. His wife makes tea in the wide kitchen.

There was a portrait of him on the cover of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* in the early 1950s, but I do not remember it until an hour later,

finding it in an odd corner of his work room. He has not changed from those days. He is over eighty now and his walnut-brown face carries a worn weight. A smile crinkles everything.

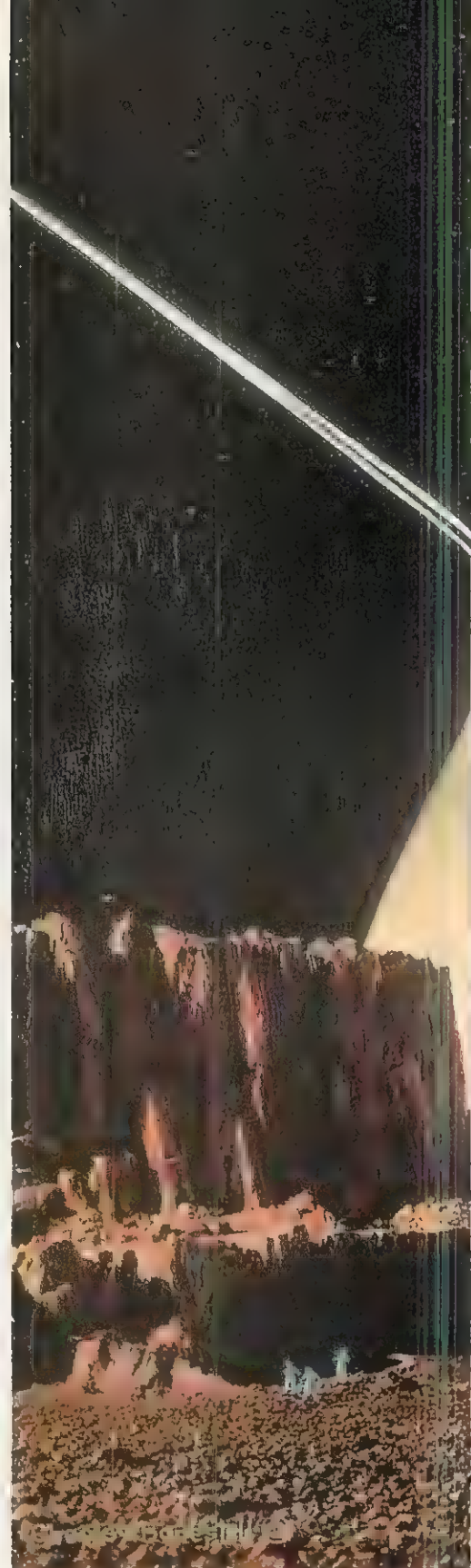
Here in the house, sipping tea in green Japanese mugs that warm the hands, I see the work for which he is not known. Oriental prints. Portraits, belying the common judgment that he cannot render the human figure and make you feel with it. Delicate pencil work. Architecture, stress and design, massive stones balanced in a fine grid of lines. "I see the patterns first, then the rest. I was an architect, you know, before the first world war. I designed the ceiling of the San Francisco Opera House."

After that? "I traveled. I saw the world. I lived in New York and Paris and London and finally Los Angeles. Designing buildings and then movie work, backdrops, special effects. Disney did a lot of innovation in

The photographic reality of Chesley Bonestell's cosmic landscapes helped invent science fiction.

BY GREGORY BENFORD

INTERPLANET





ARY PIONEER

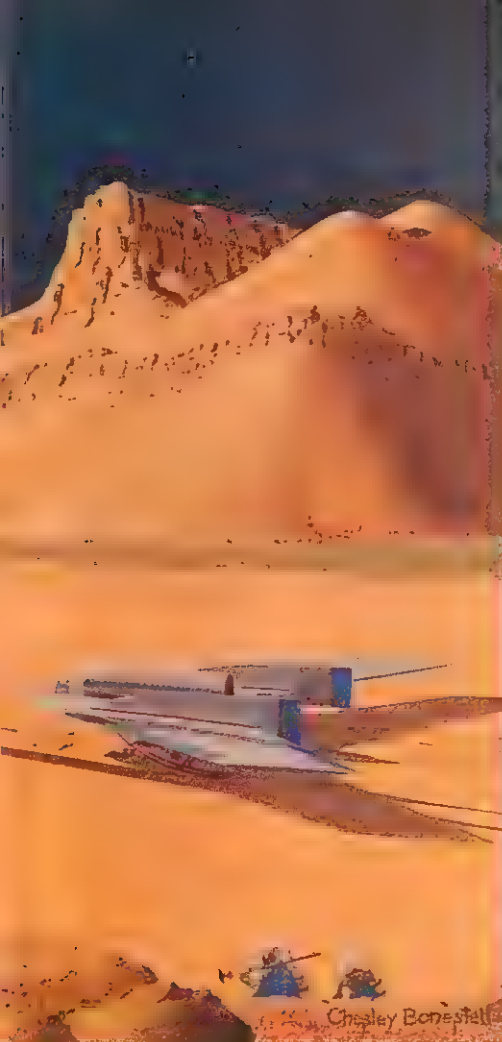


special effects, but it required someone who could draw and paint with such detail that the film viewer wouldn't catch an error. Things had to be real. I learned much that way. We were very well paid; that was Los Angeles."

There are no astronomicals inside the house. To see them you must go outside, up an exposed wooden staircase, into the study. There they crowd the room in the heady smell of fresh paint, rags, stretched canvas. A congress of infinities.

Does he ever read the things he has illustrated? No, he doesn't like science fiction very much. Not enough solidity, perhaps. He rarely if ever willingly puts a human artifact into his work, a spaceship or a pressure dome, or a space-suited figure. He doesn't have any idea of what the future will bring and feels awkward trying to visualize it. But stars and planets, yes, the astronomer friends he has can give him descriptions of how things must be there and he can see it, too, in some closed mind's eye, so that it comes out right. Most science fiction is quickly outdated, anyway. Look at all the fins on spaceships, and the cloudless Earths. Better to stay away from it.

Someone in Palo Alto has made prints of two of his oils. One is of an expedition that has landed on a dry, rust-orange Martian desert and is deploying equipment. It seems oddly out of balance and unconvincing, not his best work. The other is better: *Saturn from Titan*. His classic signature piece.



Wrong, of course, since we now know that the methane atmosphere there blankets everything. But it was right when he painted it, the way any scientific theory is correct as an approximation of the truth which is never fully known, and that is all anybody can ask. He has a few prints left. I should not feel that it is necessary to buy anything, of course. I take the Saturn. There is something awesome in the mass of the planet even at this distance, a cold white with a hard curve to it. Looking at it you believe in your soul that planets are gods and men but pawns.

There are stills from motion pictures he has done. George Pal, worlds colliding, rockets, *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, a Groucho Marx hanging from a twentieth-story window against city lights done in oil, but the distant car headlights moving. Stop-motion. Planet-wrecking. It was a lot of fun and a lot of money but his reputation will probably rest

In the years before spacecraft photographed other worlds, only Bonestell could show them to us, as in these images of the assembly of a Mars spacecraft in Earth orbit (below left) and the eventual explorations of the surface of Mars itself (above). Much of Bonestell's finest work was done for Hollywood, as these paintings of Jupiter as seen from the surface of Europa, one of its moons (above right), and of the surface of Jupiter (right) show.





on the astronomicals displayed in Boston and New York and San Francisco. Double stars and novae and howling unseen storms in deep atmospheres. A sense of the infinite.

At the center is craft. A view of Saturn at dawn from the Grand Tour probe: it stands dead upright on the easel, half-finished. "Black is very difficult. It is so hard to get the absolute pure black in comparison with the soft color of an atmosphere or a star's envelope. Almost impossible, I think, unless one practices a great deal. I have seen very few

painters who can handle it, even in abstracts."

He shows me a few abstracts he has done and they are very good, though none uses very much black. He has tried everything and mastered many techniques, though he has sold very little of it. Most of the good oils he keeps for himself; he can afford to. For a while there was a rush to buy his astronomical oils and he nearly became a factory, turning them out faster than he should have, but that is past. Most sold to aerospace engineers and now they have less extra money

and perhaps it is just as well.

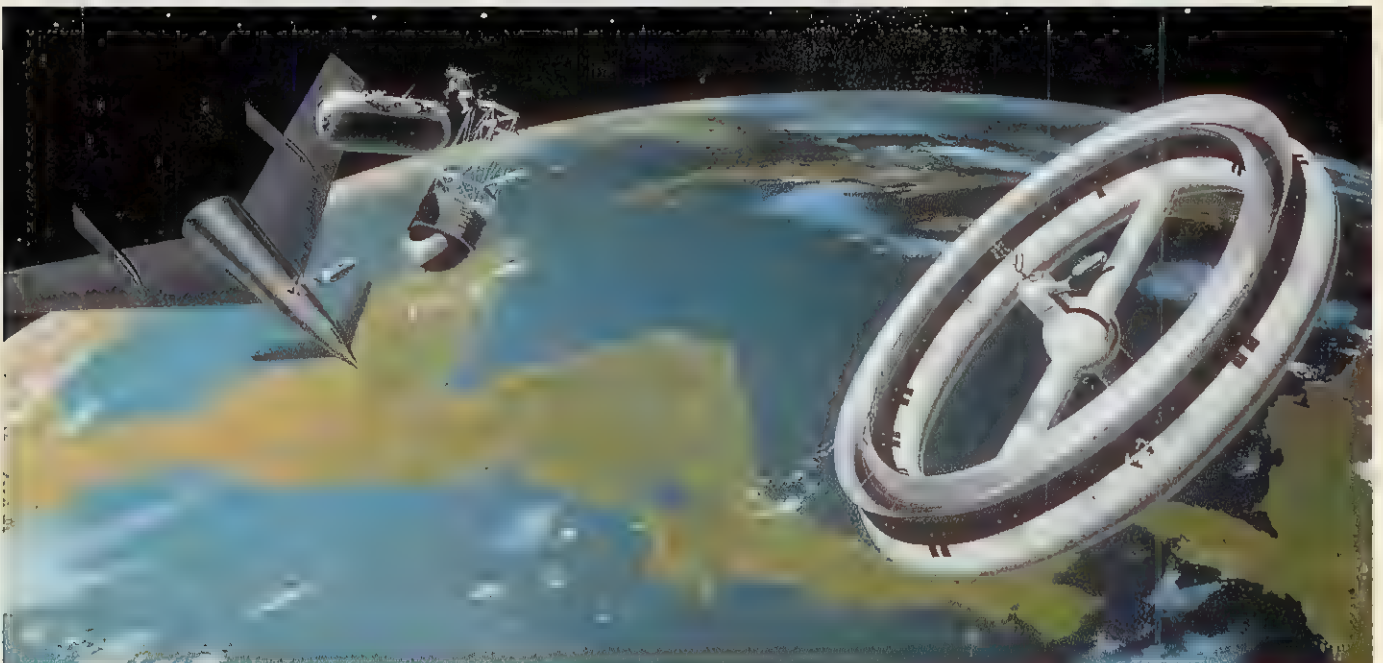
He works hard and keeps a regular schedule but he cannot keep up with the load of work. He would like to do a painting for my forthcoming novel, *Jupiter Project*, but where's the time? Instead he gives me a name of a friend, Don Davis. Davis does an oil for the book, prompting a letter from Robert Heinlein (as much as anybody could ask for), exclaiming that I was so lucky to get someone so like Bonestell to do the cover. They share the same principles.

The only science fiction person he sees these days is Heinlein, who lives an hour away on the coast. He likes the Heinlein approach; it seems more honest somehow, closer to the tenuous facts of science. And the Heinlein futures have a lived-in feel.

He does not see many artists. Carmel is a center for them but they are mostly dabblers, amateurs. He does not have much interest in the young: He thinks their technique is poor. The test of learning to draw a cow is not in the fingers but in the eye: You must learn to see the cow. Few do this today. "Once having seen it, you must draw or paint so that others can see it. Not the thing itself, but the way it seems, that is art. What else is there?" □

Editor's Note: Prints of Chesley Bonestell's Exploring Mars and Saturn from Titan, signed by the late artist, are still available! They are of high quality and the same size as the original paintings. For information write Bonestell Space Art, P.O.Box 15382, Chevy Chase, MD 20825.

Bonestell's Mars colony is still a possibility (above). Bonestell brought the space station alive for Werner von Braun's article on the same topic in Collier's (below). His image of the second stage ignition of an orbital launch vehicle (right) fulfills the dreams of all SF readers who long for other worlds.





MOVIES

Continued from page 22

makeup, I still wanted him to look like Ice T."

With only a moderate effects budget (the overall budget for the picture is rumored to be between 20 and 30 million), Talalay was looking for a hungry up-and-comer who would give this project his or her all; instead, she scored big, signing legendary Academy Award-winner Stan Winston, fresh off his ground-breaking work on *Jurassic Park*. "I am the biggest Stan Winston fan in Hollywood based on what he did for us," she says. "We didn't have a huge budget to work with, but Stan Winston came to us and said, 'I really want to do this film and I'm going to figure out how to make it work.' Stan and his crew did a genius job and were so wonderful to work with. He did absolutely brilliant work."

Thanks to the comic character's heavy cult following, requests poured in from celebrities wanting to play cameo roles in the film. Names that have been banded about in connection with *Tank Girl* range from Billy Idol and Bjork (untrue) to Iggy Pop and En Vogue's Dawn Robinson (true). "I had to turn a lot of people down," the director says with a note of wonder in her voice. "I had to tell Billy Idol, 'Sorry, there just isn't a part. You don't really want to play a trooper who gets killed.'"

Perhaps in homage to one of Talalay's favorite films, she cast Malcolm McDowell in a key role. "I was very inspired for *Tank Girl* by Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*," says the director. "There are many individual geniuses out there that I'm constantly learning from and stealing from and that I admire. Making movies that are different is such a huge accomplishment in Hollywood today."

The soundtrack is also shaping up to be something special for today's disenfranchised post-punk crowd. "There's a great deal of interest from bands wanting songs on the soundtrack," she says. "We've been sending out scenes and getting a really good response back." Though Talalay couldn't mention names



Hardwicke brings Hewlett's elaborately imagined impossible-to-afford tank to life.

in deference to contract negotiations, rumors about the Beastie Boys, Hole and Sonic Youth have been brewing in on-line circles.

Talalay herself monitors the Internet via America Online. "I was a math major in college and a computer programmer before I got into the movie business, so there's a techno-nerd side to me," she says with a laugh. "They put my E-mail address in *Wired* magazine and I'm actually enjoying getting that E-mail. It's a great thing about just having real individual contact with people that you would never have otherwise had contact with. There's even a *Tank Girl* newsgroup (alt.fan.tank-girl) on the 'Net.'"

Much of Talalay's E-mail has been from hardcore fans worried that Hollywood will compromise the qualities they value in *Tank Girl*. As hard to please as studio executives, *Tank Girl* fans flooded Talalay's on-line mailbox. "There's definitely a feeling in the E-mail I get of 'Don't let them make you soften things.' We're always going to get killed by the

absolute hardcore. I especially know this from doing *Freddy's Dead* and working with John Waters. There were people who never forgave John for not being X-rated, and there were people who never forgave us for doing any sequels to *Nightmare on Elm Street*. There will be the people who will feel that I ruined *Tank Girl*, but I think there are a lot more people out there who are going to be excited to discover it for the first time and excited by what we have been able to accomplish."

Talalay answers their urgency with her own imperative not to compromise *Tank Girl*'s wild, gritty and unconventional heart. "There was a time in the script process when I had to say, I don't care what they say, I'm handing this in with all these outrageous things in it, and if the studio doesn't like it, I'll go to an independent," she says. "So much of my upbringing was being told, 'Because you're a woman you can't do this,' and 'Women don't do that.' Even in Hollywood, with its 'boys' club,' part of what I'm trying to do is to break that. *Tank Girl*'s a perfect example. I was told when I was taking it around that female action heroes don't work, period. And I was saying, I just don't think it was done right yet; I'm taking a different approach, and the fact that men and women alike really love this comic book is a real sign that it's worth trying. I think my attempts to break the conventional mold is what I share with *Tank Girl*."

Born in Chicago and raised in Baltimore, Talalay has gained a reputation for being grounded in the seriously weird through her early work with John Waters, known during his early career as "the prince of puke," and on a string of low-budget features, including *Sid and Nancy* and *The House on Sorority Row*. "I'm fifty percent completely conventional and fifty percent John Waters' producer," she says with a laugh. "I learned so much from John, who is incredibly committed to his own vision, and stronger than anybody I've ever worked with in terms of being his own filmmaker. He has his own wonderful style that no one can or should copy, and he taught me that you never let 'them' screw it up. But on the other hand, I have a house and a husband and a dog."

In the U.K., *Deadline Magazine* has begun running double-sized issues as fans count the days until *Tank Girl*'s March 1995 release, and on the Internet, alt.fan.tank-girl virtually crackles with rumors of casting decisions, reports on magazine articles and TV show mentions, as well as rueful warnings to the filmmakers to stay true to the comic. MGM/UA tracks awareness of *Tank Girl* while Rachel Talalay races to cut together *Tank Girl*'s movie debut. All want the same thing. "There's something about getting a film up in front of an audience and watching them have a really good time that is so magical," she says. "There's this incredible creative satisfaction of starting from scratch and developing a script and then finally watching yourself get it right or get it wrong. It's kind of indescribable." □

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YOUNG MAN

Continued from page 46

you bother him further, we will none of us see him again. Why won't you be satisfied to allow us to shoot targets in the marsh?"

The next morning he sat by the bay and once again he wept. He wailed loudly, for he felt abandoned and alone. Yakhan came out of the water and said, "Oh, my poor friend, do you still love me so? My heart is weary, weary. Look there, once again they are surrounding us. Once more they will shoot me full of arrows. Look, they have brought harpoons and spears, hoping to do me harm. Oh, I am weary, weary."

The canoes came in five rows. The marksmen leapt out of the woods. Spears and harpoons and arrows struck his body front and back. He ran as though unweakened toward the water, all those shafts sticking out of him. Several young hunters who were swift afoot leapt forth and grabbed him, but he threw them off with ease. They tumbled, shouting. As Yakhan leapt into the water, the fishermen threw more spears. They tried to hold him with nets, but he passed through without shaking them. Then the harpoons, spears and arrows floated on the water. Yakhan emerged on his favorite snag, far from shore.

On the shore, Yakiyal was grabbing bows from warriors and throwing them on the ground. He shouted, "Weep! Weep! Now he will go away, for he is weary! No one will ever see him again! He is dead to his family, dead to this world, dead to all of us!"

Already the women and the children in the village were lamenting him with loud wails. They surrounded Yakhan's mother, who had not approved of her husband's desire to kill the wayward son. When the warriors and hunters straggled home, they listened to their wives, their sisters, their daughters. Then, in shame and sadness, the warriors cut off their hair. For five days the village mourned with Yakiyal, who embraced Yakhan's mother.

On the fifth day, Yakiyal returned to the usual meeting place. He saw Yakhan on the snag. Yakhan did not come ashore, but spoke from the snag. "Weep no more for me, Yakiyal, for truly I am not dead, I am living. You are always crying for me, but listen, I have a nice house much like yours, in a place where there are no commoners, and no chiefs, and no slaves. Agaylaitish has come there, for my father secretly tried to have her killed, and that is why she went away. I have taken a new name, Emogolek, the spirit-protector. Now stop crying, for the one who loves me will become chief of the people."

And it was so. Yakiyal the commoner's son became a chief, and his wife, Princess Ahatau, became the mother of the tribe. Yakiyal always said his good fortune was due to Emogolek, the sea-prince, protector of the downtrodden, the strength of hunters and fishermen, and to this day the powerful spirit of the Shoalwater tribe. □

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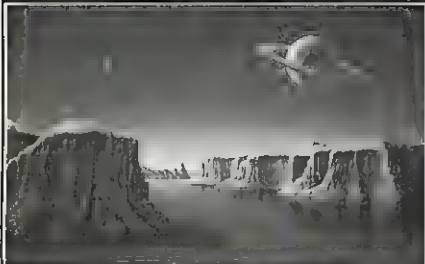
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REALITY SCHOOL

Continued from page 85

Someone had managed to blow up the power lines after all.

THE LAVA PARTS LIKE THE RED SEA, A RIVER OF fire on either side. I watch, stunned, as walls of glowing earth rise around me. Can my own belief have such power? I descend into the Earth, flaming magma cocooning me.

Volcanic heat rages against my skin. I feel chaos plucking at me, magnetic fields streaming through me. I am floating in a firestorm of magma, like a spirit swimming in the fires of creation. It all begins to blur; then comes back into focus. It is not the Earth I am floating in, but a lake of luminous red, with a flame burning brightly at its center. It is an enormous candle, a sunken lake of wax, the light of the flame glowing through its translucent walls. It seems impossible.

But not as impossible as the voices.

The human voices, all around me.

"ALEXANDRI!"

I heard my name called and didn't want to answer. I was holed up in my room, weeping into my blanket. I was no longer six years old, but—what? Thirteen? Thirty? My breasts hurt, and I'd gotten my period—just after the miserable cold breakfast we'd all had together, after the loss of the continuum-bubble, after a nighttime vigil waiting for protesters to invade us, protesters who never came. I'd complained to Lisa about my cramps—we'd sort of made up, because with the whole world falling apart, what was the point of staying mad?—and she'd grunted, "Well, about time it happened to you too! I don't know how much more time we'll have! Enjoy it while you can."

I'd stared at her, bewildered. I wasn't even sure exactly what she meant. After seeing her with Danny, I figured she meant sex. But it was all so alien to me, so unreal. Wasn't what was happening to the world bad enough—did we have to grow old in these great, uneven jags?

We were just *kids*, damn it! I heard my name called again. But I didn't want to talk to anyone. If there'd been any counselors left in this place, I wouldn't have talked to them either. I especially didn't want to hear about Lisa and Danny Hutton.

"Alexandri, come see what's happened outside!" It was Lottie Gern, and she was frantic. She ran back out of my room and on to Roberta's room, shouting.

I cursed and went outside. I found Lisa and Danny and most of the kids, plus Mr. Playstead and Miss Jennings, standing on the front lawn. We'd kept sentries there all night, ready to call out at the first sign of intruders.

The forest had rolled up like an army, right to the front of the administration building. All

the desert grass-covered mountain slopes, across the little valley from the school property, were thick with dense woods.

There was no sign of any of the picket lines, or of any human life out there at all.

FACES BEGIN APPEARING IN THE CANDLE rim... faces like luminous glass, to match the voices. Danny...? Roberta...?

LATER THAT DAY, HARVEY SNOWDEN CAME running in yelling that the woods were dying. That was the first we knew that a total ecological catastrophe had set in. "What do you mean, dying?" I yelled back from the rec room/battle center. A group of us had been trying to *will* reality back to normal, without effect. We'd just been listening to the TV for any mention at all of protesters, or of us. But all of our opponents, including Reverend Patwell, seemed to have vanished from the face of the Earth.

"Dying!" He glared at me as if I were an idiot. "Don't you know what that means?"

"I know, and you don't have to yell!" I shouted. But his wild, reddened face scared me. Clearly something had scared *him*, and badly. "What did you see?" I asked, as the others gathered around.

"Dead trees—a lot of them—all dried out, like it was winter or something."

"It's not winter. It's May. Or June, maybe," said Lottie Gerns, sneezing for the hundredth time that hour. Poor kid had come down with allergies, bad, and the infirmary had no more medicine.

"No foolin'," said Harvey. "But look down in the valley, and you'll see a lot of trees that don't know that." He waved his delicate feminine hands in the air. "It's weird. Way down in the valley, it looks like fall—everything's all red and yellow and brown. But closer up to us, everything's just dead. Shriveled."

"What's it mean?" asked Lottie.

"How the hell do I know what it means? But it isn't right. And whatever it is, it's coming from here." He looked at each one of us in turn. "And it's spreading out into the rest of the world."

WE LEARNED MORE ABOUT it on the one staticky channel that remained on the television. The forests

were indeed dying, and the effect was spreading rapidly. A wave of forest and plant death was rippling outward from our location. The trees first turned fall colors—and then, instead of going into hibernation, they died.

It had something to do with their chloroplasts. Plants everywhere were losing their ability to photosynthesize. It was spreading like a virus, or a plague, but much faster. No one knew what was causing it or how to stop it; but if it wasn't stopped, it would spread over the whole planet. And if photosynthesis

stopped, well, that was it. Not just for humanity, but for everything that lived on the Earth. Except maybe for some bacteria that lived on the bottom of the ocean and lived off nothing but chemicals from volcanic vents. Except for them, nothing. Not even the cockroaches would survive.

OUR WORLD WAS FAST DIS-appearing. We could no longer reach anyone by telephone because the

phone lines were gone. I'd last talked to my parents two days before, and I felt a terrible emptiness inside; I wondered if they were even still alive in this reality. Mr. Tea and Mrs. Randolph took a car to venture down the mountain into town, to try to buy food and learn what was happening. They didn't return.

The rest of us met to decide what to do.

Mr. Playstead suggested, and we all finally agreed, that we had no choice but to go out into it, straight into the heart of the entropic fold. The disturbance seemed to emanate from a bank of fog that kept advancing and retreating within the woods flanking the school. We had been afraid to venture near it, wary of its unpredictable effects, fearful of dying for nothing. Without the shaping amplifiers, we had only our own powers, and those not fully developed. But everything we'd tried from outside the entropy zone had been futile. Perhaps from within, we could do more.

It was a terrifying prospect—but as Ashok pointed out in his quiet voice, if we didn't take the risk now, while the world was still recognizable, then our own reality-thread would just move farther and farther away. Soon it would be too late for us to have any chance at all of regaining it. Whatever the risks, this was our only hope.

Mr. Playstead stood before us, tugging at the frizzy gray beard he'd sprouted in the last three days. "For what it's worth, I'm going to go with you. I don't have your skills, but I can't just stay out here waiting for you to return. Perhaps...my experience will be useful, somehow." He hesitated and glanced at Miss Jennings, who nodded silently and stepped up beside him. She was not about to be left behind either.

Mr. Playstead cleared his throat. "I want to emphasize one thing to you all. When the shapers were lost, we think it was because of a conflict with the other shaper teams. That must not happen again. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

There were some murmurs of assent, and some of impatience.

"I'm saying, we have to work in harmony. Whatever we find in there—and I don't know what it will be, but people—" and his voice was strained as he searched for words "—if we're going to defeat this thing, we have to do it together. Any one of you alone might not be strong. But the combined strength of a

dozen shapers, in the fold—" He paused for breath, but then he seemed to run out of words, and he shrugged. He looked very old to me, and tired.

I turned to look at Lisa, and her eyes met mine for just a moment. She was scared, but soberly so. I was stunned by the maturity I saw there in her gaze and wondered what was wrong with me that I wasn't so grown up myself. I was still petrified at the thought of not being a kid anymore. And terrified of what we had to do. I felt an impulse to grab her hand and hold it, the way we had that first time we'd seen the graduate shapers at work. But almost as if something in her had sensed my urge, I saw her reach out and find Danny's hand, on the other side of her. I saw Danny squeeze back. Stung, I looked away.

The decision to go was unanimous. We began joining up to go out in pairs. We would fan out in force, but each of us would have one primary buddy to watch out for. I looked at Lisa and saw her eyes searching Danny's, their hands gripping each other's tightly. Humiliated all over again, I turned to see who else needed a partner.

Roberta, eyes full of fear behind her glasses, looked at me questioningly. I took a breath and nodded back.

WE ALL WALKED INTO THE DYING FOREST together, abreast in a line. There was very little talk, just the rustle of leaves and the snapping of twigs beneath our feet. When we came to the wall of fog that marked the boundary, Roberta and I exchanged final glances.

Mr. Playstead raised his hand, surveying our lineup. "Godspeed," he said.

As one, we stepped through...

And I stepped, alone, into the steaming jungle.

WE ARE GATHERED IN THE CIRCLE OF THE CANDLE now...like swimmers facing inward from the edge of a pool. Some of my classmates look like fire elementals, rising from the molten lake, while others are extrusions of the walls, their waxen faces bulging. Danny, Roberta, Judy... (isn't Judy dead? I wonder)... Dzaou, Ashok...not everyone has made it here, but a lot of them have. I don't see Lisa. Or Harvey, or Mr. Playstead, or Miss Jennings. Those who are here look human, but clearly all have been through wrenching changes. Some still look like children; others like adults tempered by experience; and a few look...indescribable. Children's faces with ancient eyes... or eyes bright with youth surrounded by wrinkled and weary skin. I wonder what I look like.

It is a strange reunion: all of us gazing across the glowing lake at each other, but no one speaking. My feelings are indescribable. I know without asking, that each of them has been through a terrifying journey—nine faces, nine harrowing trips through the corridors of chaos, struggling against...what? A dark master, on the throne of entropy? Or the

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meaninglessness of random decay? I know that we all meant to *do* something, but I'm not sure what. I wonder if any of the others know.

Someone begins singing, softly. It's Judy, I think. She's alive, and I wonder if it's because she never really died, or because we somehow brought her back to life. I don't quite recognize the song, but it has the sound of a lullaby. Then someone else, Danny, starts humming a hymn from church—a familiar tune, though I don't know the name. It's beautiful, and moving in a way it never was for me before. On the far side of the circle, half-hidden by the flame, I see the movements of someone dancing. I think it's Ellie, but can't be sure. But I imagine that Ellie, who thought Judy into death, has more reason than anyone to rejoice at her being alive and among us now.

The flame begins flickering brighter, hissing. It seems to be gathering power from the songs and the dance. The flame, I suddenly realize, is *our* expression, not entropy's. It is a kind of shaping, a way of reaffirming who we are—of saying, *yes, we are still here, still human*. I'm not sure what to do, but I feel memories bubbling up within me.

A bunny named Maxine appears in the air before me, and a donkey named Eeyore, and a bear named Berlioz. These are my friends who played with me in my first days at the Reality School, when I was just a child. But there are other memories that want to come up too—painful memories that ring with disharmony in my mind. My selfishness with a shaping...my rejection by Lisa...my cowardice... I don't want to let them come, don't want my failures and shame brought into the light. I struggle to hold them in, but I cannot. My shame begins to bubble out.

The faces of my friends are turning transparent. They take no notice of my shame. They begin moving about the circle, passing through one another; three or four of them are singing, their song swelling the flame. I see other people's memories taking form like ghostly photographs in the air, and I realize that I am not the only one who has experienced failure. It comforts me a little.

But now everyone seems to be looking up.

NEW FACES, OVERHEAD, GAZE DOWN FROM THE haze of the outer nothingness...faces peering like ghosts of haunted pasts.

It takes me a moment to recognize those faces...even Lisa's. She is trapped, they are all trapped, in a nothingness outside the warmth of the candle flame. They seem to be prisoners of the devouring entropy, while *we* somehow are regenerating our reality here in the shelter of the candle. There is a gulf dividing us, and they cannot cross it. They cannot join us.

"Lisa?" I whisper.

Her eyes turn slowly to meet mine.

HELP ME—!

I can hear the plea, unspoken. And I cannot answer it. If they cannot cross that gulf, how can I help?

I want to call out to her, to tell her to do it herself, to come to this place where we are gathered, singing. I want to tell her to come out of the darkness into the fire.

Help me—!

Lisa's eyes, pale and frightened in the sky, will not release mine. But I don't know how to escape from that darkness any more than she does.

Or do I?

My mind reverberates with memories: of our play together at the school, the excitement and fear we shared, learning to be shapers. *Shapers*. The memories flash in my mind, fiery with the flux of entropy. Something in that entropy does not wish me to remember. *We are shapers*. I remember her choosing Danny over me; and even now, I tremble with anger and hurt. So much time has passed. Must I still be angry? I tremble with the memory of my aloneness, of the times I sensed her presence across the infinity of space and time and could not speak to her.

Was it that I could not, or would not?

We are human. We are shapers.

Out there in the darkness beyond the fire, my friend is trapped. Perhaps she *could* come here, into the light of the fire, if there were a space for her. I am aware of Danny gazing up at her in desire and anguish, and I wonder, Can he not help her? And without quite knowing why, I know he cannot. It is not his anger that keeps her out. A space must be made in the circle for her, and it is not Danny who must make it.

The flame of the candle beats hot with the singing, with cries of, *We are shapers! We are!* coming from the others here with me...and I almost imagine that I hear the voice of God Himself saying, *I am who I am!* from the flame.

I am suddenly certain that there is no room for any other here, unless *I* make it myself. And how can I possibly make room, unless I take Lisa's place out there, in the void and the darkness, in the chaos?

THE SONGS QUICKEN WITH urgency. A hundred memories shimmer and dance in the air. I am not alone

in my anguish. The others face similar choices. But only I face my choice.

A memory looms before me: a monstrous-looking being dying in the depths of the sea because I was afraid to save it. Because I was afraid.

I am a shaper.

Help me! whispers a gaze from across the gulf of darkness. Last time, you let me die.

Electrified with fear, I make the decision. I begin to move away from the light...rising to challenge the hissing chaos. To trade places with Lisa.

THE TRANSFORMATION TAKES FOREVER, HURT-

ing hurting hurting. The candlelight recedes in the darkness, but not quietly. I feel the darkness and light shuddering, clashing; and I am caught between them, the dark fires of entropy flashing around me, charging me with despair. Will I die here? Or live in the darkness forever?

I FEEL LISA'S PRESENCE PASSING ME, ON ITS way into the light. My anger burns all over again. Why have *I* given my life, when it was Danny she wanted? Why?

Chaos swirls around me. I am being swallowed by the anger. I have tried again to forgive and failed. I wail into the darkness, "Help me, please!" and my cry is wrapped in silence.

And yet...

I sense Lisa's presence, not fleeing to the candle and safety, but returning for me. "Go!" I scream. "Go to him before it's too late! Damn you, go!" And suddenly my anger disintegrates, and I find myself shuddering with pain and crying to Lisa to save herself, and this time I mean it without any anger at all. *Lisa, go! Why do you think I did this?*

In that moment, the distant light flares brighter, reclaiming power from the darkness. Light and darkness clash in a fury. The energies of chaos flail about me, defying the light's power to reclaim me. But I have made my peace. My anger is gone, *my* battle is won... and it is the chaos fighting the rearguard battle. The darkness begins to shrink, hissing.

And I hear Lisa's voice whispering, "Come back to the light, Alexandri, come back to the light. You are a shaper...we can shape together..."

And the light blooms around us both.

IT IS A BREATHTAKING SIGHT, THE FLATTENING out of the entropic fold like an enormous soap bubble. I can see the candle, with its light and all of its faces, slowly distorting with the refraction, transmuting into a crazy, stretched-taffy image. The singing changes, brightening into strange and beautiful harmonies.

And around me, I hear the hiss of chaos fading...and I hear Lisa calling me, and Danny.

Whatever I have done, I am not the only one. I hear other voices of gratitude...other victories claimed alongside mine. I watch as the memories clustered in the air above the candle slowly come together, like a backwards explosion. *And the entropic fold flattens and vanishes...*

"LISA?" I MURMURED, BLINKING, FEELING THE grass under me. I looked around, stunned by the bright sunlight on the playground, the sky so blue it made my eyes ache, the whisper of a breeze cooling my face.

"Alexandra!" she cried. "You're safe! Thank God!" I gazed at her in wonderment, but before I could ask what *she* remembered happening, she threw herself into my arms, and we hugged and cried like grown women, like best friends who had not seen each other in years. And then we turned and wept with Danny, and Roberta, and *Judy*...and we all

ran laughing across the school yard to see who else had returned.

MOST OF US MADE IT BACK, but not all. We never saw Ashok again, or Lottie, or Harvey, or Mr. Playstead, or Miss Jennings. Mr. Tea and Mrs. Randolph were here when we returned, and a couple of the counselors. But none of the graduate shapers.

Why? We have no idea.

I'm sometimes asked if that is fair. And I ask in return, what does *fair* have to do with war? We waged war against chaos and we won. But those people were casualties. And there will undoubtedly be more casualties, the next time we have to wage this war. And we will: we have not eliminated entropy from the universe, though we seem to have closed this rift. Is there still a micro-singularity floating out there somewhere, waiting to cause more mischief? No one knows. And so we vow to maintain our watch.

How many others vanished from the Earth that we don't know of? I can't even guess. I find myself wondering sometimes: didn't I have a younger brother once, in another reality? Marie doesn't remember, nor do my parents; but they don't have my perspective, either. Everything to them is as they think it was.

How much has the Earth itself changed? The sun seems a little cooler. I know that the political climate is different; I remember living in a nation called "the United States of..." I cannot seem to remember the rest of the name. I dream sometimes of orbiting space stations glinting in the night sky, and I think perhaps it is more than just a dream. But we have not yet gone into space, and the sky is full of stars, and the two moons, but no spaceships.

Variable persistence of memory. I feel my own memories slowly slipping and blurring, and I wonder—will these words, tomorrow, accurately reflect reality as it is then?

I can only guess at my parents' feelings at seeing their child a grown adult—and not just an adult, but an adult tempered by fire. A soldier. I am physically and emotionally almost their age, perhaps even older in some ways, and they don't quite understand why. But with Lisa and some of the others, I sit on the oversight committee of the Reality School, training those who will follow us in maintaining the integrity of our existence.

And I ask myself: What qualifies *me* for this job? What qualifies *any* of us to decide what reality is the real, or right, one?

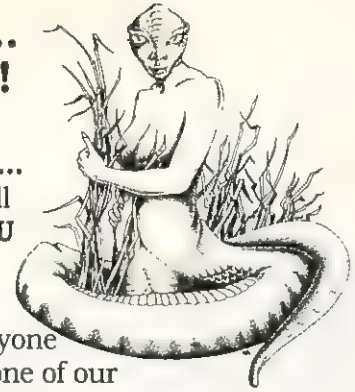
I wonder who I have become, and I think of a little girl who rode a fusion-powered turbocruiser into the school yard not so long ago, jumping up and down with glee. That was only a few months ago, wasn't it?

A few months ago...by the calendar.

An eternity. □

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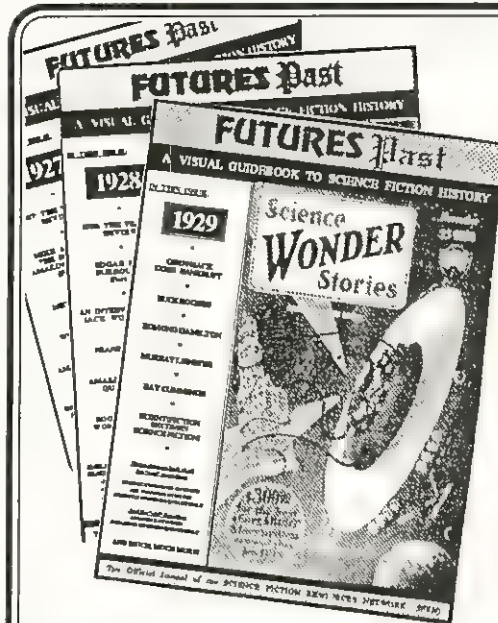
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RoboRally and Edge City transport board games to an exciting tomorrow.



The masterminds behind the megahit Magic hope to do it again with RoboRally. Cover art by Phil Foglio.

BOARD GAMES. THE WORDS CONJURE UP IMAGES of classic games such as *Monopoly*, *Clue* and *Risk*. The most recent addition to the ranks of "classic" is *Trivial Pursuit*. Since that time, games of this type have been overshadowed by role-playing games, video games and computer games. Certainly board games are less popular with younger players than they used to be. Yet they offer something that other types of games don't. Role-playing games pit one person, the game master, against his or her players; and computer games, with rare exceptions, are solitary endeavors or are played over a network by individuals who never see each other.

The experience of playing a board game, on the other hand, includes the thrill of head-to-head competition in which one person comes out on top and does so by defeating other human opponents, usually opponents who are in the same room, interacting face-to-face. In short, board games are social competitive endeavors. By not relying on eye-hand coordination they present an even field for players of many ages. While there are not many board games in the science fiction genre, it is refreshing to see that science fiction has not been entirely overlooked, as in two recent board game releases: *Edge City* and *RoboRally*.

The good news about Imagineering Design's *Edge City* is that after slogging through eight pages of rules so dense that only a hacker could understand them on the first pass, there's a rather good game to play. The bad news is those rules. Although *Edge City* is a cyberpunk game,

there's no reason for the rules to have been written in the style they're currently in. Relying on different type faces for various headers and forgoing the use of numbers (which, in some instances, extend to four subdivisions, such as "10.1.1.1 Taking DP") would make the rules a much easier read.

When all is said and done, though, *Edge City* delivers on its promise of an exciting multi-player graphic adventure and strategy board game, although neophyte players will probably spend a great deal of time going back to the rules, trying to trace all of the cross references until they find the information they need. The game can be played by up to four people, although if two game sets are combined, that number can be doubled.

One of the most interesting things about the game is that the board changes every time it is played, with competing players laying down the six-sided tiles which make up the playing field. Then, with their Data Rippers at Wannabee level, they battle to do whatever it takes to reach the status of Hacker Legend and, from that position, eliminate all other Rippers from the game by making them permanently UnCOOL.

The way to scale the levels from Wannabee to Hacker Legend is to buy Status. To go from one level to another, each Ripper needs to accumulate eight Data Points. There are a number of ways of doing this, the most exciting being to attempt Data Rips from MegaFirms. (Has anybody given any thought to a game in which players take the part of MegaFirms in their attempt to keep hackers out of their databases?) Successful Rips net the Ripper a variable amount of Data Points, with bonus points being given to lower-level Rippers for successful rips of Secret or Super Secret Data, and lower numbers of points being awarded to higher-level Rippers who try nothing more difficult than the Rip of Sensitive Data.

There are, of course, other methods of gaining Data Points, including taking them from other players or drawing certain Sprawl Cards, such as "Rumor." And Rippers need to use data points in order to purchase the necessary hardware and software to help them in their Rip attempts, too. The dice rolls required to determine the success or failure of Rip attempts and attempts to steal Tech items are relatively straightforward, although the examples of these events could be better written and more numerous.

Based upon some of the Sprawl cards, such as the BioWare Chop Shop card, the game appears to have a tongue-in-cheek, black-humor flavor. Unfortunately, the dark humor gets lost in the wording of the rulebook, which lends a much more serious air than is probably intended. Furthermore, there are two rules which might be changed in future editions. One rule states that each player chooses his or her Ripper at random, although an optional rule states that if players are in agreement, each can select their Ripper. It seems that this is the better way of going about things and this Optional Rule should be the Basic Rule instead, as most players will probably pre-

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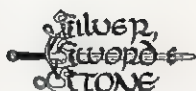
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fer to identify with one or another of the eight Rippers supplied with the game. The other rule which might be reconsidered is that concerning the necessary Data Points to move from level to level. To borrow a concept from a number of popular role-playing games, perhaps the difficulty of going from level to level should increase throughout the game, with eight Data Points needed to go from the first to second, ten to go from second to third, and so on. Changing this rule would make the game take a little bit longer to play, but could add to the thrill of rising to the heights.

Easier to understand, but still somewhat flawed, is the latest entry from Wizards of the Coast. Best known for their popular collectable card game *Magic: The Gathering*, *RoboRally* is a game which can be played by up to eight individuals or teams. The object of the game is to program your robot to scurry across a factory floor, touching a series of up to six flags in the process. Conveyor belts, gears, pushers, crushers and pits add to the drama, as does the ability of robots to fire lasers at each other. The more damage a robot receives, the fewer program cards players can draw each turn. Since the program cards determine how a robot will move, players need all of the options they can get. Repair spaces are strewn across the customizable board, which helps a great deal, as does the ability to power down for a turn, thus repairing all damage inflicted.

RoboRally's playing area consists of six one-foot-square factory tiles. It is neither necessary nor desirable to use all six during game play and, although the example in the rulebook shows four boards laid out in a square, it may be possible to place the tiles in any agreed upon configuration, thus creating a new playing field each game. All of the tiles contain their own unique set of helps and hindrances which also add to the enjoyment of the game.

The customization doesn't end with the board. The players determine where the checkpoint flags will be placed and even which square on which factory tile will be the starting point of a game. With all of these possible variations, the replayability of the game is nearly limitless. The quality of the graphics and the attention to detail which have become hallmarks of Wizards of the Coast make *RoboRally* a game worth owning.

There are, however, problems. While the Phil Foglio-designed three-dimensional pewter robot figures add a great deal to *RoboRally*, especially as regards their ability to push other robots, the copy of the game used for this review contained two broken robots. A spokesman for Wizards of the Coast announced at a recent convention that future versions of the game will include plastic, not metal, robots. If this is the case, many consumers might find the \$35.00 retail price a little steep.

Another drawback is the rule regarding special option cards. These cards can be used to grant new offensive or defensive capabilities to a player's robots, or to enable a robot

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Writers'-in-residence: Joe Haldeman, Nancy Kress, Samuel R. Delany, Pat Murphy, Karen Joy Fowler, and Tim Powers. Editors: Shawna McCarthy, Madeleine Robins. Deadline: March 31, 1995.
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to perform movements that go beyond those mandated by the program cards. These option cards are granted whenever a player ends his turn on a two-wrench repair site and elects not to repair his robot. These two-wrench spaces are found on nearly every one of the six game boards but are too infrequent to have a major effect on gameplay. Furthermore, in the race to touch the checkpoint flags, most players will probably forgo the opportunity to gain these fascinating extras. This is a shame, since use of these options could go a long way toward making the game even more fun than it already is. A possible variation in which each player is dealt one option card at the beginning of the game should be considered.

Minor rules and changes, or the addition of sanctioned variations, would help *RoboRally* take its rightful place as a new and highly enjoyable classic in the science fiction genre.

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

■ Everybody loves a villain. After all, without them, why would we need heroes? This is true everywhere, but especially in the *Star Wars* Universe, and a new role-playing supplement has just been released to make sure that spice miners, slavers, spacejackers, and smugglers are all well-represented. *Star Wars The New Republic Galaxy Guide 11: Criminal Organizations* (West End Games, trade paperback, 96 pages, \$15.00) takes place as the Galactic Civil War between the New Republic and the Empire continues, and the forces of law and order struggle to control the growth of crime. Anyone wishing to incorporate the galactic underworld in their *Star Wars* role-playing adventures will need this volume to get the lowdown on corrupt politicians, black marketers, counterfeits, and assassins, and how they fit into the world of Jabba the Hut and other crime bosses. This supplement takes place six years after the events of *Return of the Jedi*, and will help you stave off *Star Wars* fever while you wait for George Lucas to finish the next movie, due out in 1996.

■ The popular *Battletech* universe celebrates its tenth anniversary, and the creators of those robotic warriors have created a gift for their fans in the form of *Battletech Compendium: The Rules of Warfare* (FASA Corporation, hardcover, 156 pages, \$20.00). Over the years, various supplements, rulebooks, and sourcebooks have been published which have altered and sometimes complicated the rules of play, putting together a gameplaying galaxy that has meant players have to sift through many volumes for the bits of lore they need for successful gaming. No more. This volume supersedes all previously published rules, taking into account players' letters and phone calls requesting clarifications. *Battletech Compendium* uses this opportunity to rephrase the rules of play to clear up any confusions or ambiguities that have come up in this continually evolving game. Required reading for all *Battletech* fans. □

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SUPERHEROES

Continued from page 67

When they got back together again—when Flex let her husband back into her bed—I tried to guess her reasons. Until now, all I had were guesses. They had history and shared misery. Years and years of habit were pulling them together again. And maybe they even loved each other, I would think. In passing. And I thought it again, watching him bend to pick up the burnt can, Flex helping him stand again, taking him under an arm and lifting with a gentle smooth unconscious motion. Then he set the can in with their groceries, wrapped up in the blackened rag, and she didn't say a thing, and he sort of looked at her, and she felt him looking and gave this little smile, just for an instant, telling him that everything was OK and forget it. And with that they were off again, striking out for the frozen vegetables, his right hand finding her left hand, with her trusting him enough to let him hold it for as long as I could watch.

I didn't see them again until we came to the check-out lanes.

They were beside me, and their clerk looked seventeen and tired. After raising a stink about the burnt can, she made a bigger stink about an out-of-town check. "We don't take them," she announced, her voice loud and righteous. "See here, ma'am? It says so right here!"

Nobody complained. Flex tore up the check, and both of them began to count out the contents of his wallet and her ratty purse. Right down to the nickels, and they didn't have enough. So Flex asked the clerk to exclude the bran cereal—her word; *exclude*—and she turned to her husband, saying, "Bananas for breakfast. How's that?"

I didn't hear his reply.

The clerk threw them their receipt. With her tattooed muscles twitching along with her jaw, Flex told her, "Thank you," and turned and took a deep, deep sigh.

They used paper sacks; I like plastic.

They triggered the sliding doors to open, and I followed them outside. It was bright and hot on the pavement, and both of them clung to their cart, shuffling along. Just then, at the end, the Firestorm gave me a little look. Just to check me out. In all that sunlight his tattoos seemed to have faded. His eyes found nothing to worry about, and they turned and left me. Which was all right. I loaded my truck, then sat inside my hot car, rolling down the window and watching them in the mirrors. I was just sitting there, trying to think.

I got laid off in '89, and I was desperate for money. I made a few bucks letting a local lab test me with an experimental cold medicine. I made more by helping to clean up an old chemical dump. I can't blame either job, but afterward I got sick. Sick enough to spend a week in the hospital. The doctors didn't know the bug, and they couldn't figure out why I got better. But during my last night in the death

house, laying there in bed, I got a funny-strange feeling. A body-wide buzz. And when my nurse came in to steal more blood, she looked straight at me, seeing nothing. Just a dented pillow, and where was I?

Calling my name, she went into the john. I stopped the buzzing, and she came back out and asked me, "Where were you hiding, young man?"

Maybe it was the experimental medicine, maybe it was the dump. Or maybe it's a local bug, hard to catch and doing different tricks to different people. Janis Peabody turned strong. And I got to where I could make myself as clear as glass, if I concentrated. Like I did with the hand holding that block of cheddar, telling that woman to vanish.

Except for the rare little show, nobody has any idea that someone like me exists.

I used to wonder: What do I do now?

Go public?

Offer the world my talents?

I seriously thought about calling Janis and Harold, asking them for advice. But they seemed awfully busy just then, patching up their lives and paying off their debts, trying their damndest to keep out of public sight. And failing, more often than not.

The question was: Do I want to be like them? Two kinds of invisible were possible for me. All I had to do was pick one.

Which is what I do. Every day.

The two old superheroes climbed into a rusty Oldsmobile. Flex gave the Firestorm a little peck on the cheek, then a hug, and he started the engine, diesel smoke pouring from the tailpipe.

The Oldsmobile backed out, then it rumbled off.

Three bratty kids came into view, throwing gravel at the fleeing car, then giggling and dancing, pleased with themselves in a big way.

I pulled off my shirt and shoes, then my pants and underwear. Then I looked at myself in my rearview mirror, wrestling with my skin until I was a glassy outline, a hint of eyes with my short-cropped hair floating over nothing.

A couple deep breaths, and I climbed through the open window.

Sunlight reached through me, feeling like the ultimate hot shower.

The kids were standing in the open, talking about their bravery and cleverness, and I got up behind them. Real close. Then with a voice as strong and certain as God's, I said, "You're stupid little children."

They wheeled around, in unison.

"Be nice," I warned, then stepped sideways.

Seeing nobody, they hunched down low and gasped.

"I'll be watching you, you little shits."

They stumbled backward.

I left them, my bare feet beginning to blister on the pavement. But I was smiling like a maniac—smiling with my private, unrecognizable face—and I can't remember any moment in my life when I'd been quite so happy, or when life itself felt so perfectly just. □

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SCIENCE

Continued from page 32

more efficient, and involving less mass and equipment in space, when we go through the numbers, we still end up with a very expensive life-cycle cost. I think we need more new ideas.

BRIN: Would you say that this endeavor is fundamentally dependent upon us becoming an interplanetary-traveling species, so that we're comfortable in near-Earth space, moving around the asteroids; so that we have those technologies and we're ready to build the lasers in space?

FORWARD: I think that what we need is a manufacturing capability: people up in space, building things from space resources, collecting space energy. We're going to need a lot of energy to do any of these jobs, even for sending small probes, and it would be better to do it out there. That means that we're going to have to have a full-fledged space manufacturing capability, which we're going to use for other things.

BRIN: Many other things, such as using space resources to become so rich that our civilization won't begrudge kooks like us who want to send little robots to the stars. In the end, our exploratory spirit feeds from the same fundamental vigor as liberalism, free enterprise, and environmentalism, and that is the wealth and the luxury of free time to dream. Only people who don't worry about where their next meal is coming from worry about saving the whales, about feeding poor children, or about flying to the stars. So the long range goal of visiting other planets is ultimately tied up with the serious business of saving this one.

SF AGE: We've talked about how and why. The next question is clearly, where would we go?

POST: Although the Alpha Centauri system is closest, at 4.3 light years, some people like Barnard's Star, 6 light years. There are three good solar-type stars at 11 to 12 light years—Epsilon Indi, Tau Ceti, and 61 Cygni. There are also much closer targets which are in great favor. A few hundred to a few thousand astronomical units is the inner edge of the Oort cloud of comets, which would be very interesting to examine up close. And 550 astronomical units from the sun, a telescope can use the gravitational lens effect of the sun. If we have a true interstellar destination, we can send a precursor probe in exactly the opposite direction, and view the target through the sun's focusing of that target's radiation. Or there may be brown dwarfs or black holes within a light year of the Earth.

SF AGE: Any final comments?

POST: The final question is, *why* go to the stars? Developing the technology will open the solar system to us. My slogan is, we want the stars, but we'll start with Mars. The rewards will be nothing less than infinite knowledge, infinite power, infinite wealth, and immortality. □

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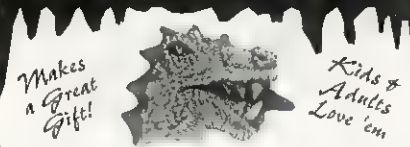
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IDIOSYNCRASIES

Continued from page 71

She remembers her father, however. Her father walked around every day, all day, with a large English-language dictionary in his hand though he spoke only Lithuanian. He worked in the back of a tailor shop. If someone other than the proprietor, who did speak Lithuanian, spoke to him, he would offer the dictionary and indicate with nods and motions of eyebrows that the other should find the necessary words in the dictionary. The customer, if compliant, would do so: Eleanor's father would then nod sagely, take the words down and vanish into the back room. Whether he ever bothered to translate the words into Lithuanian, Eleanor never knew, though near his deathbed she did find a pile of slips of paper with odd words scribbled on them: "black," "linen," "smart." Her father also liked a carrot beside the plate at suppertimes, which he would not eat but would polish with his napkin before grace. Eleanor thinks he was a brilliant man, like a flare in a dark night.

"I rather like it," she says now to Charles, who is Twill.

Twill sits and gazes at the grapefruit. He turns it over and pokes at its concave surface, gingerly. Then glancing at the ruins of Eleanor's, he turns it back over, takes up a spoon and carefully, with a nearly sensual roundness to his movements, explores the odd and moist mystery of its interior. He eats some and puckers. Then smiles at Eleanor. Then addresses the fruit again.

Eleanor smiles to herself. She finds it an odd sensation to smile inwardly and not put on a smile for someone else. She likes it, doing it here, now, for herself solely.

For she suddenly finds it in her head that she may have married well after all.

"You'll be a great man someday, Charles," she says. "I'm sure of it."

Twill stops and looks up. "Why? Am I getting fat?"

DEAR UNCLE, HIS DAUGHTER WRITES AT THIS point, the prior chronological confusion having been cleared up. *What you said is true. You saw me true to the bone. I am the daughter of my uncle. I hoped on Earth not only to find a home—I was never at home in my own society, as well you know: some of us are born alien to either our time or our societies. I was just lucky enough to find someplace else where I feel at home. As I say, I not only hoped to find a home, but a place where I might engage in my chosen work—yes, it is still dealing in legal niceties—and where such work might be elevated into the stellar regions of high finance and be parlayed into a position of immense respect. Here I can achieve all the power and prestige that a person in our profession on our world cannot. However, the oddities I bring with me—I seem to have a penchant for offbeat head-*

gear, for some reason: I think it is psychological compensation for the oddity and small number of my limbs now that I am human—anyway, that and other things work against me. I am the most minor of lawyers, the lowliest of the lowly. Because of my idiosyncrasies—I am well loved for them, incidentally, on the personal level—anyway as I say, because of my idiosyn-

"...However the oddities I bring with me—I seem to have a penchant for offbeat headgear, for some reason: I think it is psychological compensation for the oddity and small number of my limbs now that I am human..."

crasies I'm compelled to offer my services for little or for free and have become the champion of the average man and woman and of the poor and destitute—exactly as you are, dear Uncle. Other lawyers even imitate my idiosyncrasies, to the point where so-called underdog lawyers often appear with soap dishes handy. So in a way I have come home back to you, Uncle. I miss you, but as you know, you are here with me, in my soap dish so to speak, you slippery old devil. Hope you are taking care of Charles. Yours, Twill.

NED BURGER FLAPS THE ENVELOPE AT BETTY Blaine after taking it from the mail deliveryperson, who knocked at the door out of uncertainty as to whether Eleanor A. Thomas might accept a letter. Mrs. Thomas, having died a week ago at the ripe old age of eighty-five, give or take a contented year, no longer takes mail. Her lawyers do, however.

"Now that we have the estate all squared away," he says to his new junior partner, "it would be just our luck if this letter opens a whole new can of beans."

"Why don't you just look and see?" she says.

"What if it's tomfoolery? Look, it's addressed from her husband."

"Who's dead too."

"Dead but famous. This is a crank letter."

"We won't know till we open it, Ned. He

might have sent it before he died, and it's only arrived now. Or he might have made a secret arrangement, so that she would receive this letter if he predeceased her. She just inconveniently died before she managed to receive it. We'd better open it. Might be important."

Ned sighs as he slits the envelope and unfolds and reads the letter within. He passes it to Betty that she might read:

My dearest Eleanor,

Something moves me to write this, I don't know why, but I just want to, and here I am. Did you know that my largest fear in the old days, on Earth, was that I loved the idea of the strange more than I loved you? Yet it isn't true—I'm not saying I'm unhappy being so far removed from you (as surely you know by now) or that I pine for you. I'm just saying it's a relief to find that love, in its odd way, never dies but rather grows and clarifies with time and distance. In distance all those petty things that get in the way of love fall away; they're thrown over like little plastic soldiers—which brings back other memories—but never mind them. Just want to say hello and hope you and Twill are happy. I'm certainly having a kick of a time with Uncle Magrood. Sorry I haven't written sooner but, well, it's different here. Love—

Ned and Betty exchange raised eyebrows. Ned finds himself, for the first time this afternoon, not entirely preoccupied with Betty's nearness and perfumed presence, which has grown upon him of recent days, but instead thrown back to his childhood, when by pure chance he encountered Mr. Thomas on the sidewalk. Ned was riding his trike; the man was on a walk. An early brush with greatness, before even Mr. Thomas knew his own greatness. Ned being a precocious child—as the reader knows, the boy having slipped into this story at a far younger age than I intended, and on a far earlier page—somehow in that contact felt a touch of not only the incipient greatness of Charles T. Thomas but also a touch, a bud, a sprout of the man's strangeness. For the man had more than a touch of strange.

Ned cannot forget that day.

"I think," he says, "it's some odd joke of his. He was a weird one."

"People say she loved him for that," Betty says, turning slightly. Her nearer arm nearly brushes his. "She loved him for his idiosyncrasies. Thought it presaged his greatness."

"I heard that too," Ned says, aware again of Betty's proximity.

"Do you ever have any thoughts," asks Betty, turning her head so she regards him from the corner of her eyes, "of greatness? Of trying to be anything really new, really oddball, really great?"

A strange elation passes through him. "I guess," he says.

"Do you have any—idiosyncrasies?" she says.

He sighs, with an eerie sound that a celestial wind passing through him might make.

"I hope so," he says, inflated by a sense of unspeakable hope and desire. □

Poetry Contest \$24,000 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes

Owings Mills, Maryland — The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry, "we have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in one original poem, any subject, any style to:

The National Library of Poetry
11419 Cronridge Drive
PO Box 704-1751
Owings Mills, MD 21117

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem



On the Threshold of a Dream, featured above, is one of The National Library of Poetry's recent deluxe hardbound anthologies.

received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Anthologies published by the organization have included, *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, and *Of Diamonds and Rust*, among others.

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CONTRIBUTORS

JEFFREY A. CARVER IS THE AUTHOR of numerous SF novels, including *Neptune Crossing*, the first book in the *Chaos Chronicles*, inspired by the emerging science of chaos theory. Book Two in this sequence, *Strange Attractors*, will appear in the spring. His other recent novels include *Dragon Rigger* and *Dragons in the Stars*. Before becoming a full-time writer, Carver was a scuba diving instructor, a quahog diver, a UPS sorter, a word processing consultant and a private pilot.

Mark Rich has recently stepped onto the information superhighway via GENie, which hopefully will not impede his future writing. His vignette "On the Collection of Humans" was just reprinted in *The Year's Best SF*. Rich makes his home in Stevens Point, Wisconsin with his life companion Martha Borchardt and a menagerie of amphibians.

Bob Eggleton won the Best Artist Hugo at the most recent World Science Fiction Convention, held in Winnipeg. His career continues to explode, as Paper Tiger will soon be publishing the first collection of his work, *Alien Horizons*, and Friedlander will be coming out with a trading card series spotlighting his career.

Robert Reed was the first grand prize winner of the Writers of the Future contest. His critically acclaimed novels include *Black Milk*, *Down the Bright Way*, *The Hormone Jungle*, and *The Remarkables*, and his short story "Utility Man" was a finalist for the 1990 Hugo Award. **Doug Chezem** recently purchased two new PowerMacs to use in the creation of the unique computerized artwork which has earned him the nickname of the "Digital Dali." Patrons include Bell Atlantic, as well as Legend Entertainment, for which he has done game design for *Death Gate* and *Gateway*.

Ken Graning has been a professional illustrator for decades with his advertising and editorial illustrations appearing in numerous magazines, books, newspapers, brochures, record album covers and other media. **Lawrence Watt-Evans** was elected president of the Horror Writers Association (formerly Horror Writers of America). He is the author of over eighty short stories and

two dozen novels, including *In the Empire of the Shadow*, the second volume of his *Three Worlds* trilogy.

Rick Wilber has been busy the past few months selling yet another textbook (*The Writer's Guide to Revision*), a treatment for a television movie, and numerous poems and short stories. Wilber edits *Fiction Quarterly*, and teaches at the University of Southern Florida, where he is on the mass communications faculty.



Rick Wilber



Jessica Salmonson

JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON'S short story collection *The Eleventh Jaguarundi and Other Mysterious Persons*, which includes all of her surrealist tales, is due out shortly from Wordcraft of Oregon, and *Phantom Waters: Northwest Legends of Rivers, Lakes and Shores* will appear as a trade paperback from Sasquatch Press in the autumn.

David Honigsberg lives, works and writes in New York City. His short stories have appeared in *Elric: Tales of the White Wolf* as well as the upcoming *Sorcery: Magicks Old and New*.

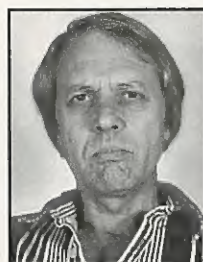
Gregory Benford's second short story collection, *Matter's End*, will be appearing next month from Bantam Spectra. **Tom Simonton** has taken over the drawing for the *Elvira* comic book for Fantaco, for whom he has also drawn covers for *Air Warriors* and *Weird West*.

Ray Aldridge is working on the illustrated hypertext version of his previously published tale "The Fabularium," as well as creating stained glass windows based on his various short stories.

Jon Foster is a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. His artwork has appeared in *Aboriginal*, and will soon appear in the second part of an adaptation of the novel *Neuromancer*. **Martha Soukup** has gone Hollywood. Danny Glover recently transformed her Hugo and Nebula nominated novelette "Over the Long Haul" into a half-hour short feature on Showtime called "Override," which starred Erika Alexander and Lou Diamond Phillips. **Paul Di Filippo** was just awarded a grant from the Rhode Island State Council of the Arts to finish his novel *Fuzzy Dice*.



Bob Reed



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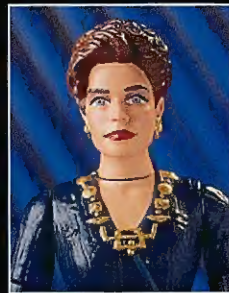
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